

The Next Day: A Not So Merry Christmas

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Rated: PG

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Summary: After the "Season's Greedings" episode, Lois hears that a plane with a stop in Wichita has crashed, and she fears the worst.

Lois Lane still had a smile on her face as she slipped under the covers and made ready to finally call an end to this magical night. It had been the one of the best Christmas Eves she'd ever had... no, it had been *the* best. Nothing had gone as she had planned, but it couldn't have gone better.

She'd went to a lot of trouble cooking a big holiday turkey dinner. Something that was a major undertaking for her. She'd been disappointed that Clark had plans to go home for the Holiday but was hardly surprised. If Jonathan and Martha were her parents, she'd look forward to visiting them too. She also knew that her own family was out of the question. She wanted to enjoy this Christmas Eve, so even if her parents had been available, she'd have never thought to invite them. She was a bit sad that Lucy wasn't going to be able to come, but she had some new boy toy that she planned to spend Christmas with.

Still, she had looked forward to having a great time at dinner with Perry and Jimmy. They were her family anyway, her Planet family. Then, as the day progressed, those plans had begun to fall apart. Perry's family had suddenly appeared in town, and Perry's true Christmas dreams had come true. Unfortunately, that meant that he'd had to skip her dinner. She had understood completely and was happy for him. Jimmy was still ready and actually was looking forward to the dinner, but in her young friend's case, Lois had sabotaged herself.

She had taken it upon herself to patch up the misunderstanding between Jimmy and his latest object of desire, Angela. So, instead of coming over to sample her big-deal meal, Jimmy was spending his Christmas Eve with Angela.

So, despite all her advanced planning and the work she'd put in, it had looked like it was going to be just Lois and some tired old Christmas special on television... again. But then there had been a knock on her door, and everything had changed. Clark had come by.

When she'd asked, he had made some lame comment about the airport being snowed in. Of course, there hadn't been any snow. Clark was just being Clark. He'd found out that her dinner plans had fallen apart, so he'd showed up... and the night had been wonderful.

Lois reached up and turned out the light on her bed stand, but the smile was still on her face as sleep finally claimed her.

Lois stepped off the elevator and moved leisurely toward her desk. She was a few minutes late but wasn't concerned about it. It was only going to be her covering the city desk today. Even Perry wouldn't be in on Christmas day. The assistant editors all took turns covering the various holidays, and this day, she would be reporting to Dave Majors. He was a nice enough guy, but someone with very little actual experience. It was his turn.

A skeleton crew of reporters and staff was responsible for putting together the stories that Dave would have to assemble

into something resembling an issue from a major metropolitan newspaper. Even though it was Christmas, the definition of a slow news day, the Daily Planet would still hit the newsstands tomorrow morning.

Due to her situation with her family, Lois often volunteered to take the Christmas shift. It allowed many of her colleagues the opportunity to spend the day with their families and loved ones. In the past, it had never made any difference to her since most of the time she'd just be sitting home being bored by bad television and the continual assault of Christmas music on the radio.

Luckily, the after-holiday sales ads took up a large amount of the space in the paper, but she was still expected to fill her share of column inches. Often, this was accomplished by pulling stories off the newswires and rewriting them to show a local perspective. Lois had been running late, so she hadn't watched any news on LNN as she got ready, nor had she listened to the radio on her way over. She just couldn't take any more Christmas carols blaring out of her car stereo.

Lois booted up her computer and was getting ready to scan the news feeds when Dave stuck his head out of the office. "Lane," he shouted. "What are you doing here?"

Confused, Lois met his irritated gaze. "I'm looking for something to write about."

"Well, I don't know how you missed it, but get down to Metropolis International. A passenger jet crashed shortly after take-off about an hour ago. See what you can find out."

"I'm on it." Lois leapt out of her chair, and grabbing her bag and coat in one motion, she headed for the elevator.

Traffic was light, and the highways were in decent shape, not having had any appreciable snowfall in several days. Metropolis International Airport was located a few miles outside of the downtown area, on the edge of a first-ring suburb called Blakesborough. Blakesborough had started out as a refuge for the nouveau riche, and like so many other areas which had started out the same, it had almost immediately begun its slow, steady decline. It was now considered a suburb "in transition."

Before she was close enough to see the tower and the main terminal buildings of the airport, Lois saw the smoke that marked the site of the crash. It took several minutes to get her Jeep close to the scene. As it was, she still had nearly a half-a-mile hike to get to where onlookers and other members of the media were constrained by hastily erected barriers and security.

"Have they given out any official statement yet?" Lois grabbed the first shoulder she came upon. The man turned and frowned at her. He shook his head.

After working her way toward the front of the crowd, she could see fire-fighting and other emergency vehicles surrounding the still-flaming, broken fuselage of the 727 jetliner. They were quite a distance away, so she couldn't see anything in any detail. Lois made a bit of a pest of herself by asking questions of everyone around her. Apparently, things were finally starting to calm down. The last of the ambulances left about a half an hour ago. The emergency crew was letting the fuel burn itself out and was concentrating on keeping the blaze contained within a secured perimeter. Since the plane had just taken off, it had full fuel tanks. The plane had been burning for over an hour, but now it looked like the fire fighters would have it totally under control within a few more minutes.

Lois saw an official-looking man approaching a portable stage that had been put up by several men wearing FAA coveralls. There was no electricity available to set up microphones, so the gentleman waved his hands, asking for quiet. Surprisingly, he got it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have a brief statement to make." He paused for a moment and consulted a piece of paper in his hand. "Metro Air flight 731 from Metropolis to Los Angeles, with a stop in Wichita, suffered some sort of, as yet undetermined,

mechanical failure and went down six minutes into its flight. As soon as it's safe to do so, crash investigators from the FAA will examine the wreckage and try to determine the cause of the crash."

"Were there any survivors?" Someone to Lois' left shouted out the question. She saw the grim look on the man's face.

"You can understand that we can't release the names of anyone on the flight until next of kin can be notified, but as far as we can tell, there were no survivors amongst the passengers or the crew." He crumpled the paper in his hand. "There will be a formal press conference back at the main terminal in one hour. Any questions you have will be answered at that time, but please realize that there probably won't be much information we can give you."

Lois' lower lip had been tightly pinned between her teeth ever since she heard the word "Wichita" come from the mouth of the airline official. A cold fist currently held her heart in its icy grip. She needed to get to the main terminal as soon as possible. She had to know how many flights to Kansas had been scheduled to leave Metropolis that morning.

After a call to Dave, to let him know that she was waiting for the official press conference, she moved over to stand with her fellow reporters. On her way to the area set aside for the conference, she had scanned as many departure video screens as she could. No plane that she saw, other than Metro Air 731, was scheduled to be going anywhere near Wichita, or even Kansas.

She'd tried calling Clark at home a couple of times, only to get his machine. She didn't have the nerve to call his folks in Smallville. What if he wasn't there?

She knew that Metro Air wasn't the only airline to use Metropolis International, but it was the largest. M.I. was a Metro Air hub, so they had the most flights. Still, she knew that Clark would have had other options, so she made the effort to check the departures on all the other airlines while she waited for the press conference to begin. No one else had any flights to Kansas on Christmas day. With each screen Lois checked, the fear in her heart grew a little stronger, and her hope a little dimmer.

Her attention was drawn back to the podium that had been erected at one end of the concourse. A different gentleman from the one who had addressed them at the crash site walked up to the microphone. Lois quickly pushed her way up near the front.

"Ladies and gentlemen, while it's still early in the investigation into the crash of flight 731, we do have some information to impart." This man, like his predecessor, paused and consulted a piece of paper he held in his hand. "It appears that the crash was precipitated by mechanical failure to the starboard engine due to the ingestion of foreign matter causing irreparable harm to that engine."

Lois frowned along with all the others standing near her. Someone off to her left shouted his frustration at the official. "What the blazes does that mean?"

"A flock of birds crossed the flight path of Metro Air 731, and several were sucked into the engine, causing the critical damage."

Lois heard a low chuckle next to her and looked over to see who would think such a catastrophe was funny. It was Leo Nunk, the bane of all legitimate news people. She glanced down at his notepad and scowled. Nunk had written in large quotation marks, "Flock of Seagulls brings down Jet". She was tempted to cause the man bodily harm, but it would only encourage him.

Her attention was drawn back to the podium when someone called out a question regarding any survivors. Lois allowed herself a glimmer of hope, only to have it dashed by the look on the man's face.

"I'm sorry to say that the entire passenger list and crew have been accounted for... and there were no survivors."

Lois felt herself go numb all over; she was finding it hard to breathe. This couldn't be happening. Not now, not when she was just beginning to realize just how much...

She shook her head. She wasn't going to go there; not now. It had to be a mistake. Clark must have missed his plane. But then why hadn't he answered when she called? She had to know. She had to find out. She turned her attention back to the man.

"It's company policy not to release the names of the victims," he continued, "for at least twenty-four hours. This will give us time to notify all the next of kin." He folded the paper and slipped it into his pocket. "That is all for now. We will let the media know if there is any new information to be disseminated." He began to walk off the impromptu stage.

Lois rushed up and grabbed him by the arm. "Excuse me. I know you can't release the passenger list, but I think my partner might have been on that plane. I just have to know if he was on board."

He stopped and faced her, his expression grave. "I'm sorry, Ms..." he looked at her press pass, "Lane, but even if I was allowed to give you that information, I can't help you. I don't have it."

Lois was about to plead her case, but the man shook off her grasp and strode quickly away. In a few moments, she found herself standing in the crowded concourse... alone.

It had been a frustrating hour for Lois since the press conference. She had called in the story, such as it was, and Dave had told her that he'd prep an informational piece in case nothing new came up before press time, but that she should stay there and follow up any leads she could find.

Lois had leads to follow, all right, but they tended to be more focused. First, she canvassed the various airlines, checking and double-checking their schedules. She confirmed that there had been no flights scheduled to land anywhere near Kansas in the last twenty-four hours. If Clark had planned to fly out to see his parents today, as he had told her he was going to, then he had to have been on that flight.

She no longer had any choice. She had to call Clark's folks.

It was with a growing sense of dread that she approached a pay phone in the concourse. She had the Kent's phone number written down in the little address book she kept in her bag. Her hand shook ever so slightly as she dialed the numbers. It only rang twice.

"Hello. Kent residence."

"Hel-lo," Lois' voice cracked. "Martha, is Clark there?"

"Oh, hi, Lois. No, Clark's not here. He--"

A sob escaped from Lois' throat as she slammed the phone down. Oh, God. It was true. Clark had been on that plane. It was the only explanation.

Lois sat in one of the chairs in one of the departure lounges, staring out the window. She didn't really see any of the activity that was going on out on the tarmac; she didn't really see anything. Her focus was inward. It was on the ever-deepening pain that assaulted her heart, on the cruel mockery that the fates had decided to make of her life.

All her life, Lois had been a strong-minded, independent woman. She had never needed a man to "complete" her or to fulfill her. But like most people, she did crave companionship. It was just that those few times she had allowed herself to be vulnerable to someone, it had wound up as a federal disaster. She had convinced herself that all men were like her father, and if that was the case, then she would be fine all by herself.

Then Clark had come along. She couldn't really pinpoint the exact time when he had changed from the annoying hack from Nowheresville that she had been saddled with to her trusted colleague and friend. But he had. He was her best friend... and

maybe something more. But now whatever promise their relationship might have once held was gone. Clark was gone, and she didn't know what she would do without him in her life anymore.

Suddenly, her tears burst forth, as if the crumbling earthen dam that had been her emotional bulwark could no longer hold back the tide that had been threatening its defenses for so long.

Martha Kent hung up the phone, her face a mask of confusion.

"Hey, Ma, what's up? Who was that on the phone?"

She looked over at her son, her bewilderment still evident. "That was Lois. She asked to talk to you. I told her you weren't here, but before I could tell her you were out in the barn with your father, she hung up." Martha frowned. "She sounded really upset about something."

Now Clark was frowning as he walked over and picked up the phone. "I hope nothing is wrong."

He dialed the number and waited until her machine answered. "Lois, this is Clark. Mom said you called. I'm sorry I wasn't available, but I was out in the barn with Dad. Call me back." He turned to Martha. "She's probably at the Planet. I should have thought to call there first." He dialed a number as familiar as his own. It rang several times. Clark was just about to hang up when someone answered.

"Lois Lane's phone, this is Lacy Prescott. Can I help you?"

Clark had to wrack his brain to remember that Lacy was a new researcher hired only a few weeks ago. "Lacy, this is Lois' partner, Clark. Is she there?"

"No, she left a couple of hours ago. I think Dave has her covering the big crash."

"Crash?"

"Yeah, a jetliner crashed shortly after take-off from Metropolis International this morning. I think she's there. Can I take a message?"

Clark ran his hand through his hair. "Just tell her I called."

Clark strode into the living room and turned on the television. He flipped through the channels until he came across LNN news. Martha followed him.

"What is it?" She asked. Clark held his hand up as he concentrated on what the anchor Barbie was saying.

"...officials still refuse to release any names of the victims from Metro Air flight 731, but they have admitted that there were no survivors. Now turning to international news..."

Clark flipped off the set and moved over to the small corner desk where his laptop sat. It took a few moments to boot it up, but the screen soon came to life. After connecting to his folks' internet provider, Clark spent the next several minutes scanning page after page of information. Finally, he shut the computer down.

Martha, who had been standing, watching her son with growing concern, could contain herself no longer. The look on Clark's face scared her. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"There was a plane crash out at Metropolis International."

Martha reached out and placed her hand on her son's shoulder. "Oh, honey, that's terrible. But you do know that you couldn't have done anything about it? Even if you'd been in Metropolis, it's highly doubtful that you'd have found out about it until it had already gone down."

Clark shook his head. "I know, Ma. I've learned to accept that I can't be everywhere. But that isn't what I was checking into. You said Lois sounded upset, so I looked up some information on that flight." Martha nodded. "Apparently, the main destination of Metro Air flight 731 was Los Angeles, but they had a stop scheduled for Wichita."

Martha held her hand to her mouth. "Oh, my."

"I told Lois that I was taking an early flight out to here, after I

left her last night."

"You don't think... Do you think that she thinks you were on that flight?"

Clark shrugged. "I don't know. It's possible. You did say she sounded upset."

Martha slowly walked over and sat down at the kitchen table. Her eyes were misted. "Oh, Clark, you can't let her think that."

"So, what can I do? Lois doesn't have a personal cell phone, and I know her beeper still hasn't been replaced from when she lost it during our last investigation." Clark sat down next to his mother.

She grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze. "Honey, you know what you have to do."

Clark grimaced. "You're right." He stood and spun into the suit. "I'll call you and Dad tonight."

"Just make sure that Lois is all right."

He nodded, and then in a red-blue blur, he was gone.

Lois was still sitting, staring out the window at the airport. A few tears still rolled down her cheeks, but not enough so as to draw any attention from the folks seated nearby. She had chosen a seat away from the main body of passengers waiting for their flight to be called.

Suddenly, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Lois, can I take you home?"

She turned and found herself staring into the bright blue spandex-covered chest of her oft-time savior. Unfortunately, for all the occasions he'd been in the nick of time to save her butt, he hadn't been there this time. She stood and threw her arms around him.

"Oh, Superman, he's gone. Clark is gone." The waterworks started in earnest anew as she buried her face into his chest, soaking the iconic red and yellow shield.

He gently stroked her hair. "Shhh, it will be okay. Let me take you home." He felt her nod.

While hundreds of thunderstruck airport patrons watched, Superman gently guided the distraught Lois through the airport and out into the clean, crisp air.

Superman wrapped her close to his body to provide additional protection against the cold, but the flight was a short one, and in only minutes, they were landing on the front steps heading into Lois' building.

As if in a trance, Lois walked up and let herself into the building. Superman followed. Another minute later, she had managed to unlatch all the locks to her door and was stepping into her foyer. She didn't look behind her, as she just dropped her bag and coat on the floor. She was hardly aware that Superman had closed the door behind them.

Lois stared listlessly into her apartment. It seemed suddenly cold and empty of life. The little tree that she and Clark had laughed about stood forlornly in the corner. The bright star on its top was the only thing that didn't appear gray to her eyes, and even that had lost much of its brilliance from the night before.

The only thing that hurt worse than the fierce ache she felt in her heart was the knowledge that it would never go away. In so short a time, Clark Kent had become her best friend and maybe something more, and she wasn't looking forward to a life that didn't include Clark in it.

The blinking light on her answering machine caught her attention. If this had been a short time earlier, she might have felt a surge of hope that it was Clark calling after receiving one of her messages. But the certainty of her despair had quashed that hope. It was probably just Dave wondering where the heck she was.

She pushed the button and nearly fainted when she heard Clark's voice coming from her machine. She turned toward Superman, her eyes wide in wonder. "He's... that's... that's Clark?"

Superman nodded. "That's what I came to tell you, Lois."

Clark was never on that plane." Superman looked nervous.

"Lois... I--"

"You?" She walked up to him and put her hand on his chest.

"Oh, of course. Why didn't I think of it as a possibility earlier? You're his friend; you probably flew him out to the farm." She flailed one hand about, as if it could help her think. "What... was it like some sort of Christmas present?"

Superman stepped back and stared at her like he did when he had a hard time following her leaps of logic. Clark did that, too. She blushed.

"Um... yeah, I guess you could call it that." He began to raise his hand toward his hair and then stopped himself. "I, um, gave him a ride to his folks' place. After I heard that he'd stayed in Metropolis to attend your dinner party, it was the least I could do. It's what friends do."

Lois slowly sauntered back close to Superman, and using her finger, she traced the "S" on his chest. "Am I your friend?"

A wary look came over the Man of Steel. "You know that you are, Lois."

She bowed her head and whispered into his chest, knowing that he could hear her. "Could I get a ride... somewhere?"

"Sure, Lois." He smiled at her. "Where would you like to go?"

"Smallville. More specifically, the Kent farm. I need to see Clark."

"I can do that."

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