

I'll Be Home For Christmas: Her Story

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Summary: Tempus is up to his old tricks again. This time, he's swapped Clark with one of his counterparts in the multiverse. Will their soulmates be able to help them get home for the holidays?

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A companion fic to I'll Be Home For Christmas: His Story

"And I do mean a *dress* code!"

Someone was laughing. Claire's head swam as she tried to get her bearings. One minute, she'd been tracking down the waiter with the veggie platter; the next, things had gone strangely blurry and everyone had disappeared!

In fact...the entire ballroom itself had disappeared. She now stood in a small, dingy room that looked to be some kind of storage closet. Something about it felt familiar, but she couldn't think why. A man in a silvery jumpsuit grinned at her before suddenly vanishing into the ether. Claire blinked. Was she losing her mind?!

There were voices behind the room's only door, though it didn't sound like the party she'd just left behind. These voices all shouted to and over each other against a cacophony of ringing phones and humming machinery, and some of them even sounded familiar. Cautiously, she opened the door and peeked outside, blinking against the bright, fluorescent light.

Well, at least now the sense of familiarity was explained: she was at the Daily Planet, though *how* was anyone's guess. Despite the weirdness of it all, she didn't fight the smile as her eyes found Perry talking with Jimmy, apparently regaling him with a holiday-themed Elvis story while the chaos of a busy newspaper flowed around them. Lois Lane was at her desk, of course, though her hair was shorter and she seemed much more relaxed than Claire had ever seen her.

Lois looked over her shoulder in Claire's direction. At once, the woman grinned and rose to her feet. "Clark! There you are!"

Who...? Claire looked around for whoever Lois might be talking to, but Lois soon parked herself in front of her and slipped her arms around Claire's waist. "Got another Superman exclusive?"

"Super*man*? Lois, what—" Claire froze. The voice that had just come out of her mouth was much deeper than usual.

She cleared her throat, bringing a massive hand up to her face as she did so. Something was very, very wrong...

Perry came up and clapped her on the back. "You alright, Son?"

"Uh..." said the deep voice inside of Claire's throat.

"Hey guys, check it out!" Jimmy grinned and pointed up at one of the television monitors on the wall. "LNN is using that photo I took of Superman bringing a Christmas tree to the Coates Orphanage!"

The news anchors prattled on about the orphanage while an image in the corner of the screen showed a dark-haired man in a costume very similar to hers. The tree he carried was identical to the one she had brought to Coates earlier in the day, and she recognized the children in the photo: little Denise was even carrying the same doll. Every detail of the scene was the same as she remembered, save for one thing: she hadn't been a guy at the time!

"...Excuse me." Claire disentangled herself from Lois and ducked back into the storage room, closing the door behind her. Something very weird was happening. Whoever had turned her into a man obviously wanted to make it look like she had always been that way, but why? And why was everyone at the Planet going along with it?

She spun into her costume—or at least, a version of her costume—and flew out the window. There was exactly one person who could help her figure this out. If she could find him, everything would be okay.

* * *

The Vreelands' estate in Gotham was still filled with music and gentle chatter, with no signs that anything was amiss. Apparently, Claire's sudden disappearance had not disturbed the evening. She closed her eyes, listening for Bruce's heartbeat; the strong, steady rhythm was some distance away from the crowd, and she soon found herself hovering over one of the snow-covered gardens just outside the house.

The naked trees still lent the area a sense of seclusion. Colored lights had been strung throughout their branches, and a burning fire pit encouraged anyone braving the cold to sit for a while on one of the benches. It would be an excellent place to land unobserved, and if necessary, it would be an excellent place for a private conversation before rejoining the party. As such, Bruce's presence here made perfect sense.

What did *not* make sense was his current conversation partner. Some curvy bottle-blond with an undersized dress that exposed far too much to the elements was currently fawning all over him, giggling and twirling a strand of bleached hair around her fingers. Bruce actually smiled at the woman as though he were enjoying himself; he brought an arm around her, letting his hand slip down to—

“Bruce Thomas Wayne! What are you doing?!”

The man had the nerve to look perplexed! “Hello, Superman. Let me guess: crime is too low, so you've resorted to being the Fun Police?”

The hussy with him giggled.

Claire dropped to the ground, gaping. Had the bad guys gotten to him as well? Nothing in his eyes suggested that he was being coerced or even playing some elaborate practical joke on her; if anything, he looked at her as if she was a stranger. “Bruce, please, I really need to talk to you. I don't know what's going on right now, but something very weird is happening and I need your help!”

The bimbo cooed. “Brucie, you never told me you were friends with Superman!”

“Do you mind?!” Claire leveled a glare at the unnecessary third party.

The tramp raked her eyes over Claire's body with obvious appreciation. “Not at all!”

Claire folded her arms over her chest. “Well I do!”

Blondie finally took the hint and went back inside, leaving her alone with Bruce.

Claire scowled at him. “Honestly, what are you even doing with her? She's not even your type! Or does she have a doctoral thesis hidden in her cleavage? Maybe the cheap dye-job is to disguise her secret identity as Worth-Your-Time Woman!”

Bruce gave a deep sigh and stood up from the bench. “Superman, is there something I can do for you, or are you just here to ruin my date?”

“Bruce, it's me!” Claire stepped towards him and looked into his eyes, willing him to recognize her. “I'm trapped in a man's body! I need your help!”

He gave her an odd look. “I...really don't think I can help you with that.”

“Of course you can!” She lowered her voice. “Come on, you're the world's greatest detective! If there's anyone who can solve this mess, it's Batman.”

“Wait...You think I'm Batman?!” He chuckled. “Look, Superman, maybe you've been working too hard.”

“Will you stop calling me that?!” Claire's frustration was building by the second. “It's me! Claire! Your wife!”

The odd look returned. “I'm not married.”

The words hit her like a slap. She stared at him, struggling not to let herself cry. “Please, don't do this to me. I need you! Something very crazy is going on!”

“Clearly,” he agreed, mildly.

“Do you honestly not remember?!” She gulped. “Luthor's White Orchid Ball? Us? Our wedding? The cruise we were supposed to take but ended up missing completely?”

He hummed noncommittally, one hand tucking itself inside his coat. His fingers brushed against something metallic. A cigarette case began to slide from his inner pocket.

Her forehead scrunched in confusion. “Since when do you smoke?!”

Bruce froze, still gripping the cigarette case halfway in his pocket. His heart began to beat faster. He looked her over as though assessing.

She couldn't see inside the case. Claire watched him with confusion that slowly began to morph into a sense of foreboding. She lifted slightly from the ground, her own heart beginning to race. “...Bruce?”

He let the case fall back into the pocket and brought his empty hands up in front of him. “Tell you what, how about if we make a deal?”

Claire dropped back onto her feet. “What kind of deal?”

“One that should be simple for you. If you can tell me something that only my wife would know, then I'll hear you out. But—” He held up a forefinger. “If you can't, then you'll have a talk with some doctors I know. Agreed?”

She let out a breath. “Fine.”

“You have one chance.” He folded his arms, watching her through narrowed eyes. “So make it good.”

Claire nodded. Something only she would know... Briefly, she considered holding two fingers a certain distance apart, but that wouldn't cut it.

At last, she smiled: she knew exactly what to tell him. "You hate being alone."

For a moment, he simply stared at her. The corners of his mouth began to twitch. Finally, a deep laugh erupted from him. "I'm sorry," he managed between guffaws, "but you missed the mark on that one."

"Oh, no I didn't." She smiled serenely at him. "You asked for something only your wife would know, remember? So here it is: something you never even figured out about yourself. You, Bruce 'Batman' Wayne, hate to be alone. That's why you've always surrounded yourself with people like Dick, Alfred, Commissioner Gordon, and me. But because you were so afraid of losing someone else the way you lost your parents, you spent years keeping everyone at arm's length. You lied to yourself, telling yourself that you didn't need anyone and that you preferred to be alone, all while living in self-imposed torment."

He stared at her, silent. Perhaps it was her imagination, but the color seemed to have left his face.

"Meet me at the cave," he muttered, turning to leave. "I trust you know where it is."

* * *

"I looked up those names you gave me." Bruce addressed her without turning as soon as she reached the bottom of the stairs that connected their house to the sprawling cave beneath. Alfred was still away on vacation, so she'd popped into the kitchen for drinks.

She set the service table down by Bruce's chair, turning the tray so that the coffee was near him. He reached for the cup, eyes still on the screen of the massive computer that stretched along this section of the Batcave. "Jonathan and Martha Kent of Smallville, Kansas. Farmers. According to official government records, they have only one child: an adopted son named Clark. No mention of 'Claire Kent' anywhere." He sipped the coffee, then blinked at it in surprise.

Claire took the cup of chamomile for herself and stretched forward to look over his shoulder. A myriad of documents and photos were splayed across the screen. Their sources ranged from scans of The Smallville Post to national census and tax records, but all had been altered in the same way. "So, whoever's behind this was able to tamper with government files."

"That's...one explanation." He took another sip of the coffee and tapped a few keys, pulling a different set of images to the fore. "Clark Kent was reportedly found as a baby, presumed abandoned..."

She nodded. "Mom said I couldn't have been even a year old when they found my spaceship."

He was quiet for a moment before moving on. "Enrolled in the 4H club, Future Farmers of America, Boy Scouts..."

"Girl Scouts," she corrected.

"Was a quarterback at Smallville High and attended Midwestern University on a football scholarship..."

"Aha!" Claire pointed accusingly at the doctored photo on the screen. "That's not right: I was a cheerleader! Whoever faked this made a mistake!"

He swiveled his chair around to look at her. "Guys generally don't become cheerleaders."

"Oh. Right." Claire sighed and took another sip of her tea.

Bruce turned back to the screen. "Degree in journalism, worked as a free-lance reporter before getting hired at the Daily Planet..."

Claire hummed her agreement.

"Currently married to fellow reporter, Lois Lane..."

The tea spluttered, some of it going down the wrong tube. When the coughing-fit finally abated, she stared at Bruce in shock. "I'm sorry, *LOIS LANE*?!"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Unlikely?"

"Try impossible!" Claire shook her head. "Whoever set this up clearly doesn't know Lois if they think she'd ever get married, for one thing! She's the poster-girl for independent women who 'don't need no man'! And as for being married to me, of all people..." She laughed. "Look, don't get me wrong; Lois was a good friend and a great reporter, but she would sell out her own grandmother if it meant getting a scoop. The fact that you haven't read about my secret identity in the Planet *proves* this whole thing is fake!"

"Hmm." Her husband leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers, staring once more at the screen. "Well, this is all certainly enlightening."

She perked up at his words. "Oh? Are you seeing a definite clue for who's behind it? Are any of your own memories coming back?"

He shook his head. "I just mean that this explains why an alien from another planet would have such a strong interest in Earth. Nothing about Superman added up before, and I don't like when things don't add up." He stared at the screen again, fingers drumming on the arm of the chair. "You said you saw a man disappear as soon as you found yourself in the Daily Planet?"

Claire nodded. "Yes. I thought I must have been going crazy!"

The drumming stilled. Bruce cleared his throat. "Can you describe the person you saw?"

“Even better: I’ll sketch him for you.” Claire sped to the main study on the ground floor of the house and returned with paper and a pencil. In under six seconds, she had completed a reasonably accurate drawing of the face she remembered.

Bruce’s expression was unreadable as she handed him the paper. When he looked at it, his eyes widened. “This is very good. A skill like this could be useful.”

“Sometimes when we’re investigating together, I draw whatever it is I’m using my x-ray vision to look at.” She picked up the remains of her tea from the table and downed it.

Bruce stared at her. After a few moments, he returned his attention to the paper. “This looks like John Doe.”

“Who?” Claire frowned at the unfamiliar name.

“John Doe,” Bruce repeated. “A former politician and a Darn Nice Guy.” He blinked, shaking his head as if to clear it. “Anyway, no one knows where he came from, but he gained massive popularity and political power virtually overnight. He wound up being committed to a mental hospital; they dragged him away while he was screaming that Clark Kent and Superman were the same person.” A frown puckered his forehead. “Kent and Superman were seen together.”

Claire’s eyebrows rose. “What?”

His hands flew over the keyboard for a moment or two. A video popped up on the screen, showing what looked like news footage of a man being loaded into a padded wagon. Lois was present, as was the male version of herself that Claire had seen in the news clip back at the Planet. Another man arrived also: one with glasses and a very charming tie. The man in the orderlies’ custody flew into a conniption at the sight of him, screaming and raving just as Bruce had described. “That’s not Clark Kent! That’s a *different* Clark Kent—he’s from another universe!”

Bruce paused the video and leaned back in the chair, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “Another universe…”

She stared at him. “Do you think there’s something there?”

“I think things are finally starting to add up.” Bruce met her gaze. “Right now, I can see three possibilities.” He ticked them off on his fingers. “Option one, you’re Claire Wayne. Someone turned you into a man, faked a lot of evidence that you were always a man, and somehow gave everyone on the planet false memories to match the new narrative. Anyone who could do that would already have more power than they could ever hope to gain, so what would be the point?”

Claire shrugged. For some reason, the thought of magical imps popped into her head, but now was not the time for such silliness.

“Option two,” Bruce continued, “you’re Clark Kent. You’ve had a tragic break with reality. Somehow, despite the demands of being both Superman and a full-time reporter, you’ve found the time to thoroughly stalk me. You not only know your way around my house, but you’ve also done incredible feats of detective work to find out my deepest personal fears, my true taste in women, and how I like my coffee.” He punctuated this last statement with a sip of the one she’d brought him.

“So, that leaves option three: You’re Claire Wayne. You live in another universe, but someone found a way to transpose you into the body of your counterpart in this one.”

“So…this isn’t my world?” Claire felt the sting of tears as the terrible implications clicked into place. “Then…you’re not really my Bruce…” She scrubbed at her eyes with the heel of her hand. “I…I thought that…if I could just get you to remember…if we could just find the loose thread in all this and pull it…th-that things would go back to normal! But, you don’t…you’re not…” She set down the empty teacup and buried her face in her hands, not even fighting the sobs that came.

After a long moment, she felt Bruce’s hand patting her on the shoulder. “Um, hey. It’s, uh…” He sighed. “Look: the good news is that option three means there’s a way to get you home.”

* * *

The Metropolis Institute for Mental Health was nothing like the facilities in Gotham: it was brighter, more modern, and had much more staff on hand. Even at this hour of the night, the two costumed heroes couldn’t turn down a single hallway that didn’t have either security guards or medical personnel making their rounds. At least one of them must have alerted the charge nurse, because she was already watching for them by the time they reached her desk. “Superman! Batman! This is quite a surprise. What can I do for you gentlemen?”

Claire frowned but managed not to comment.

Bruce loomed over the desk. “We’re here about the patient named John Doe.”

“Oh yes, Mr. Doe. A darn nice guy.” The charge nurse blinked in surprise, then grimaced. “Well, I’m sorry to say that he escaped two days ago.”

Bruce’s eyes narrowed under the cowl. “Escaped?”

"Yes." The charge nurse sighed. "We've gone through the camera footage and questioned all security personnel, but we still can't figure out how."

Claire leaned towards Bruce and lowered her voice. "I guess that makes sense if he was the same man in the storage closet."

Bruce gave a slight nod but kept his attention on the nurse. "Where is the doctor who was treating him?"

"I think that would be Dr. Mulligan..." She typed at her computer a little and stared at the screen. "Yes. Dr. Mulligan is already gone for the day; he should be back in at six in the morning."

Bruce leaned forward. "Where does he live?"

The nurse's eyebrows rose. "I—I don't know, but he might not even be home. Before he left, he said something about visiting a girlfriend."

The poor woman found herself under the full glare of Batman.

Claire put a hand on his shoulder. "Honey, we might as well just go home and come back in a few hours."

The charge nurse stared at them in surprise, and Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose. Before Claire could ask what was wrong, Bruce returned to his usual spooky demeanor. "Fine. We will come back to speak with Dr. Mulligan, and I expect his full cooperation."

The nurse nodded. As soon as they left, Claire's sharp hearing caught the soft mutter under her breath: "They're always either that or married..."

* * *

"I'm sorry." Claire hovered by the bat-computer, twisting one corner of her cape. "It's just...so easy to forget that you're not really...him."

Bruce sighed and leaned back in his chair. The screen in front of him showed everything from Dr. Mulligan's alma mater to the hospital in which he was born; unsurprisingly, the name and address of his girlfriend were not among the records. "I get it. Don't worry about it."

"We're supposed to go to Smallville, tomorrow." Claire let go of the end of her cape and lost altitude until she was once again standing on the cave floor. "We made plans to spend Christmas with my parents. The tree is already up, and we were all going to decorate it together. There was going to be eggnog and homemade cookies."

He was quiet for a moment. "That sounds really nice."

Claire nodded. "I was looking forward to it." She swallowed, swiping at her eyes again. "Especially giving him

his present. Mom helped me pick it out, and we hid it in her art studio." She stared out across the chasm that ran through the cave. A family of bats flew together in the dark. They became blurrier and blurrier until they finally disappeared.

Bruce said nothing. He'd never been a man for empty platitudes, nor could anyone justly call him an optimist. It was why he often left the task of comforting people to her. As for the times when she needed comfort herself—well, one didn't need the world's greatest detective to conclude none of that would be happening this time.

Eventually, his voice interrupted her maudlin thoughts. "What did you get him?"

She blinked at him. "What?"

"I was just wondering." Bruce gave a casual shrug. "If there's one upside to being stuck here, it's that you don't have to worry about spoiling the surprise if you tell me. So, tell me: what's he getting for Christmas?"

The utter seriousness in his tone and the thinly veiled curiosity in his expression sent her into a peal of laughter despite herself. She wiped the last tears away, and her breathing slowly steadied. "If you really want to know: I got him a coffee mug."

"A...coffee mug?" His brows knitted together.

Claire nodded.

He scratched his head. "Is that some kind of Kent family tradition?"

She shrugged. "Not really."

After a moment, the confusion cleared from his expression. "I guess it's difficult to shop for someone who already owns a lot of things."

"No, that wasn't it." Claire looked out over the chasm again. Several of the bats had roosted. Mothers nursed their young. "I got it for him on purpose."

"...Did you have a fight?"

Claire's jaw fell open as she whirled to face him. "What? No!"

He tilted his head at her. "Then why—?"

"It says 'World's Greatest Dad' on it." Claire stared down at the floor.

Bruce was silent for a long time. "Oh."

She sniffled again. "We hadn't even thought it was possible, what with my being a Kryptonian and him being from Earth. We'd made our peace with that, but then...well." She gave him a shaky smile that soon faded. "I know how much family means to y—to *him*. I really want to see the look on his face when he realizes." Claire gulped and

stared down at her hands. They weren't her hands at all: they were too large, too hairy, and the nails were too short. An unobtrusive gold band encircled one finger on the left. She frowned, peering at it in surprise.

"Where would you like to sleep?"

She brought her eyes back up to his and snorted. "I know where I'd *like* to sleep, but until we fix that problem, I guess I could just take the second upstairs guest room."

He nodded. "Alfred won't be back until after Boxing Day, but it should already be made up. I hope you don't mind a few days' worth of dust."

"It's fine." She trudged to the stairs, paused with one hand on the railing, and turned to look at him. "Bruce? ... Thank you."

He glanced up at her, nodded again, and returned his attention to the computer. "Good night."

She climbed the stairs at a human pace. Perhaps things would look better in the morning. It wouldn't do to give up hope, especially while they still had a lead to follow. Hopefully, she'd be back in her own world and her own body before Christmas day.

Claire looked down at herself and grimaced. Even more hopefully, she'd be back in her own body before she really needed to pee.

* * *

At least Dr. Mulligan had been eager to help when they returned to the institute. She and Bruce had a lot of new information by the time they stepped back out into the morning sun: John Doe was reportedly obsessed with science fiction, particularly time travel and the works of H.G. Wells. His fixation was so intense that the psychiatrists had never been able to get the truth of his past from him, only an elaborate fantasy about living in the distant future and traveling in Wells' fictional machine. Doe was also obsessed with Superman and the reporters Clark Kent and Lois Lane.

They paused on the freshly salted walkway outside the gates, and Claire turned to Bruce. "So, I guess Lois is our next lead?"

"Unless you want to hold a séance so we can talk to a dead 19th century author." Bruce ran his eyes over her, then shook his head. "Then again, my sense of what's impossible has been changing, recently; I probably shouldn't be surprised if he *does* turn up."

* * *

They landed in the backyard of a two-story brownstone, boots crunching on the snow. This was allegedly the house

where Clark Kent, a man with an incredibly big secret, lived with his wife Lois Lane, the reporter who thrived on exposing big secrets. The high privacy fence surrounding them lent more credence to the idea, but it still went against everything Claire remembered of the woman.

Inside, Lois's voice was speaking animatedly to someone. She passed in front of a large window, clutching a phone to her ear. "—but there hasn't been anything on the news, so I don't..." Lois stilled and stared out the window, straight at them. "Martha, he just came back! I'll have him call you."

Claire's eyebrows rose.

The back door flew open, and Lois ran out into the snow. She stopped just in front of them, every muscle tense, and a hand that had been reaching towards Claire now flexed awkwardly and dropped to her side. "Superman! What's—uh—what's going on?" Her eyes flicked to Bruce.

Bruce stepped forward. "We need information about John Doe. I understand you and your husband have encountered him before?"

"You *both* need information?" Lois furrowed her brow, looking at Claire again.

Claire cleared her throat. "Um, yes. Do you know much about his obsession with time travel and...uh...alternate universes?"

Lois stared at them for a while, then closed her eyes and groaned. "Oh, great! Not again!"

Bruce and Claire exchanged a look.

Lois sighed. "Come on; we can talk about this inside."

* * *

The three sat around the table in a bright, cozy kitchen. Lois leaned back in her chair, one hand curled around a cup of hot cocoa while the other rubbed her forehead. "Okay, where to start... John Doe's real name is Tempus. He likes violence and mayhem, and he desperately wants to prevent Superman's descendants from bringing about a peaceful future called 'Utopia'. Clark and I first met him two years before we got married."

Claire lowered her own cocoa and blinked in surprise. "So you *are* married, then!" At Lois's confused expression, Claire's cheeks began to feel warm. "I just... wondered. Based on what I thought I knew about the Lois Lane of my world, it didn't seem possible."

Lois brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and smiled sheepishly into her cup. "Well, it was a long, rocky road to get to that point, I'll admit. After our first real date, I slammed the door in his face."

"Date went poorly?" Claire sipped her drink.

Lois shook her head. "No, date went too well. I realize that probably doesn't make any sense..."

"It does." Bruce shifted in his chair, apparently studying the far wall.

Claire sighed. "I must have a type."

Lois met Claire's eyes again, her cup half raised to her lips. "Do you mind if I ask what things are like in your universe?"

Claire smiled ruefully. "Well, I know I don't look like it right now, but back in my universe, I'm a woman. My husband and I have been married for just over a year. When I found myself...well..." She waved a hand down her torso. "...like this, I thought I was still in my own world, so I went to him for help—or at least, the man I thought was him."

Lois's eyes widened and flicked to Bruce. "You."

He gave a non-committal grunt.

Lois smiled down into her cocoa. "That's a lot like what I did back when Tempus tried to strand me in another universe. I found that world's Clark Kent, and we ended up helping each other." She took a sip and then paused, a frown creasing her forehead. Her gaze snapped back to Bruce. "She told you everything, didn't she?"

Bruce gave another non-committal grunt.

Claire's cheeks felt warm again. "Sorry. If anything, I thought it was *you* who couldn't know the truth about Superwo—ah, Superman."

Lois stared at her with an unreadable expression. "So you trust Batman?"

"With my life." Claire met her gaze, unflinching.

Her eyes trailed over Bruce, narrowing as they lingered on the mask.

He met her scrutiny with a cool and even stare. "How did you get back from the other world?"

Lois blew out a breath, suddenly fascinated with her cocoa. "Well, what's one more stop on the way to Crazytown? I got help from H.G. Wells."

Bruce was silent for a moment. "You mean...his books?"

She shook her head. "No. I mean the real, live man with a real, working time machine. He's kind of a self-appointed guardian of that future Clark and I are supposed to create."

"Of course." Bruce's face became expressionless beneath the cowl.

"He usually shows up whenever there's a problem in the timeline that needs fixing." Lois frowned. "Actually, I'm surprised he hasn't been in touch, yet."

Claire thought for a moment. "Is there a way we can contact him?"

Lois's fingers tapped against the side of her cup. "Well, he's a time-traveler; if we leave a message somewhere he could find it, he should be able to show up at any time no matter when he leaves from." She paused, closed her eyes, and rubbed her head again. "...I hate time travel."

"Let's do that, then." Bruce studied the table for a moment, his chin resting on a gloved fist. "There's a time-capsule getting buried in Gotham Square Park on New Year's Eve. Anything in it is likely to get noticed by people interested in history."

Lois nodded. "I'll write the note, then." She fetched a notepad and pen from a nearby drawer and began writing. After several moments of scribbling, she looked up. "How will we get it into the capsule?"

"I'll take care of that." Bruce held out his hand.

As soon as Lois placed the folded paper in his glove, the air began to tingle. There was a soft rap at the kitchen door. Lois bolted to her feet and answered it, revealing a small, elderly gentleman in a waistcoat and bowler hat. Behind him, some kind of sleigh was now parked in the snow-covered yard, right across the trail of footprints they had left.

Lois smiled and held the door wider, stepping out of the way. "Mr. Wells! For once, I'm really glad to see you!"

The little man smiled and tipped his hat to her as he entered. "Best of the season to you, Mrs. Kent." He nodded at Claire. "Superman." When he turned to Bruce, his eyebrows rose. "The Batman? My goodness, I hadn't expected your path to cross with theirs for years, yet!"

"We have a situation, Mr. Wells." Lois pulled a chair out for him at the table.

As Wells sat down, he held up a yellowed version of the note Lois had just written. "So I infer. Tempus, again?"

She nodded. "Again. Though I should probably start by explaining that this isn't Superman." She motioned to Claire.

Wells stared at Claire curiously.

Claire returned to her seat, brushing her cape aside and crossing her boots at the ankles. "In my universe, I'm Super*woman*."

Wells' eyebrows raced to the brim of his hat. "Good heavens! That does quite explain a few things..." He turned

to Lois and grimaced. "My apologies for not detecting this latest upset. The truth is, I did notice a few changes to Utopia's history, but the effect was so negligible and the cause so obscured that I took it to be a mere instance of what some call a 'quantum wobble'."

"A wobble?" Lois dropped back into her chair and glared across the table at Wells. "You're telling me that having Superman completely disappear only caused history to *wobble*?!"

He held up a finger. "Ah, but Superman has not disappeared; merely been replaced." He turned to Claire. "Tell us, Madam: could you sit by and do nothing if the good citizens of this world were in danger, even though this universe is not your own?"

Claire shook her head. "Of course not!"

His smile was knowing. "Quite right. And how would you respond to the knowledge that a child would soon be born whose closest match to a father is you?"

Lois flushed, and her voice lowered. "Clark doesn't know yet."

Wells kept his eyes on Claire.

Claire took a deep breath, thinking it over. "Well, I guess...we'd have to work something out. I know the kid wouldn't be able to understand the truth for a long time, but...I don't want to live a lie. I'm sorry." She shook her head. "There's no way I could pretend to be someone's dad. Other than that, though, I'd still want to help in any way I can."

Wells turned back to Lois with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "And there you have it. Superman remains in the sky, his child is raised as well as can be expected, and Utopia eventually comes to pass."

Lois threw her hands up in the air. "So then, Tempus swapped them for nothing!"

"From his perspective, yes," said Wells. "You see, my dear, Utopia is founded on the ideals of selflessness and always trying one's best to do good; ideals that Tempus cannot internalize." He pulled out a pocket-watch and studied it with a grim expression. "Unfortunately, while his latest gambit has failed in the grander scheme, it may have succeeded on a more personal level. There are infinite timelines, and we have no way of knowing which one holds Mr. Kent."

Claire sat straighter in her chair and folded her arms. "No, Tempus did not win. Some way or another, either my husband will find me or I will find my way back to him. That's just how things are with us."

Lois crossed her own arms also and stared at Wells. "It's the same with me and Clark. Neither of us will give up until we've come back to each other! So if there's two on that world trying to find this one, and two here working to find the other—"

"Three." Bruce stepped forward from the corner he'd been lurking in and rested a hand on Lois's shoulder. She looked up at him with a little start, and he met her eyes. "I have...resources. I'll do whatever I can to bring your husband back to his family." He shifted his gaze to Claire. "And I will do whatever it takes to send you home to yours."

Claire blinked back the forming tears. "Thank you!"

Lois grinned at Wells. "So, I'd say the universe doesn't stand a chance!"

A soft beeping from Wells's pocket interrupted the moment. He drew out a small device, stared at it, and his eyebrows suddenly rose to meet his hat. "Good heavens! Is that...?"

"Is that what?" Lois's grin gave way to a look of impatience.

He gaped at her. "The tracking beacon Utopia's peace keepers placed on Tempus at his last incarceration! Quite naturally, it stopped transmitting shortly after his escape; doubtless found and destroyed. But somehow, it's now transmitting again!"

A thrill rushed along Claire's spine. "So we can find him, then!"

Bruce held up a hand. "Not so fast: it could be a trap. Why else would a man who made a clean get-away suddenly give up his position?"

Lois rose to her feet. "Well, there's one obvious way to find out. Mr. Wells, let's go!" She darted to the kitchen door, flung it open, and headed straight for the time machine.

Beneath the cowl, Bruce's eye twitched.

Claire shrugged apologetically and pushed her chair back from the table. "It's how she works. It used to drive me nuts back when I worked at the Planet, but I've got to say, it always got results."

"This explains so much," Bruce muttered as he followed her out the door with Wells close behind.

* * *

The world dissolved in a swirl of color as the machine lurched in a direction that didn't exist. Claire's hand automatically found Bruce's. He tensed a moment, then reached over and patted it. The light surrounding them slowly coalesced again into shapes and figures, and finally, they found themselves inside a very familiar barn.

The steady beeping from the tracking beacon Wells carried suddenly developed an echo somewhere in the room. At the far end, the man from the storage closet was barely recognizable beneath his bruises and had been thoroughly tied up with rope. A short distance away, at the source of the echo, three people stood staring in their direction: Lois, Bruce, and a woman whose features Claire recognized. "You!"

"You!" They spoke at the same and raced towards each other, meeting halfway. "You're in—"

"—My body!" They turned to the elderly gentleman dismounting the machine. "Mr. Wells—"

"—change us back!"

Wells held up a placating hand; the other gripped another strange-looking device. "Quite right, quite right. Now, do hold still; this won't take but a moment..." He fiddled with a few dials. "Let's see now...there."

Space bent and shifted around Claire. When it stopped, she was a bit shorter and standing next to a dark-haired man. She looked down at herself, feeling to make sure she was really back in her own skin, and was dimly aware of the man doing the same. Claire shut her eyes a moment, listening; when she heard the faint flutter in her womb, she breathed a sigh of relief. "It worked! I'm—"

"—me again! Lois!"

"Bruce!" At the speed of thought, she was in her husband's tight embrace, his arms holding her fast against his chest and his mouth crushing down on hers. A long time later, she pulled her lips a breath away from his. "I missed you so much."

He dropped a kiss onto her hair. "I missed you, too." His eyes conveyed so much more than his words could ever manage. They would make time for all the things that remained unsaid, but this moment in a crowded barn was not the right one. So, in an unspoken agreement, each slipped an arm around the other and they headed over to the other couple.

Claire reached her free hand out to shake the man's hand. "Um, hi. I'm Claire Wayne."

"Clark Kent." He returned the shake while keeping an arm around the alternate Lois. "It's nice to finally meet you. Your husband is...full of surprises."

Claire smiled at the woman. "And so is your wife." She turned towards her own world's Lois Lane, standing alone in a corner of the barn. "I...owe you an apology, Lois. And probably a few explanations. Is it all right if we talk, later?"

Her old partner shrugged. "Well, I suppose I can spare a few minutes for the jobless trophy wife." A smile told

Claire that the barb had only been meant as a joke. "Sure, we can talk."

"Thanks." Claire scanned the room for the other Bruce and found the big goof trying to blend into a patch of shadows in the corner. "As for you..." She sped to him and pulled him into a tight hug. "Thank you for everything!"

He awkwardly returned the hug. "Um, you're welcome."

Her husband's steady heartbeat grew louder as he approached from behind her. "Hello."

"Hello." The other Bruce looked hers over.

Her Bruce slipped an arm around her again and put a hand forward. "Thank you."

The other Bruce nodded once and accepted the shake.

Before releasing his hand, her husband leaned closer to his counterpart and lowered his voice. "Take risks."

His counterpart stared at him.

"I can only infer what your life is like..." He swept his gaze over the famous costume. "But in case you're like me: don't try to go it alone. Gamble on friendships, partnerships." The corner of his mouth twitched. "And if you ever get an opportunity to have Martha Kent in your life, take it!"

* * *

As the old song lyric proclaimed: for the holidays, you can't beat home-sweet-home. Claire sighed contentedly as she curled up on the couch, her head on Bruce's shoulder and her hands cradling a cup of eggnog. A jar of her mom's homemade sweet pickles rested on the coffee table; it wasn't quite the traditional Christmas snack, but something about the smell of gingerbread put her off anymore. She reached for a pickle, dunked it in the eggnog, and savored a creamy, crunchy bite.

In the easy-chair across from them, Lois looked up from her own eggnog and visibly gagged. "How can you eat those together?!"

She grinned and dunked it again. "Happily, now that I don't have to worry about hiding clues from a detective anymore!"

Bruce chuckled and took a sip from his brand new mug.

Just then, her dad poked his head into the room. "You kids might not believe this, but there's a sleigh outside!"

Lois smirked. "Are reindeer pulling it?"

"No." Her dad frowned. "In fact, nothing seems to be pulling it at all, so I'm not sure how it got here. There's a man inside who looks like some kind of historical re-enactor."

Pickles forgotten, Claire leapt to her feet and followed her dad out onto the porch with Bruce and Lois tagging close behind. Her mom already stood at the railing, watching an approaching figure. Sure enough, it was an elderly man in a bowler hat. Claire lit up. "Mr. Wells!"

H.G. Wells tipped his hat. "Season's greetings to you all! I do hope I'm not intruding?"

Her mom pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders and reached out to shake his hand. "Not at all, Mister... Wells, was it?"

He nodded. "Yes, Madam: H.G. Wells."

A confused frown knitted her mom's forehead. "Wait—H.G. Wells? The writer?"

"Quite." The corner of his mouth twitched.

Her dad stared at the newcomer. "The *dead* writer?"

"Sometimes." He gave a slight shrug, then turned to address Claire. "I took the liberty of storing this world's coordinates in my machine so as to check on its future, and I thought, in the spirit of Christmas, that some 'good tidings' might be in order."

Claire relaxed against Bruce's side as his arm came up around her. "Back in the other world, you said that Tempus didn't ruin its future. Is that true for here, too?"

The time-traveler's eyes sparkled. "Even better, Madam: the repairs to the damage have left both universes in a better state than before!" He dipped his head at Lois. "Ms. Lane, your renewed friendship with Mrs. Wayne here is an asset to both of you, the importance of which I cannot overstate." He turned to Bruce. "And of course, in my own universe, years of mistrust between Superman and the Batman have now been completely elided. Their alliance not only accelerated the creation of Utopia, but made it remarkably stronger." Wells grinned. "I cannot fully express my delight upon showing Tempus the future he helped bring about. I daresay, seeing what his own hand has wrought may do more to rehabilitate him than all the efforts of purer souls!"

A deep laugh rumbled in Bruce's chest. "Well, I won't hold my breath on that, but it serves him right."

"Indeed." Wells smiled. "I may look in on this world from time to time, if that suits you all. In the meantime, a merry Christmas to all of you!"

And A Happy New Year