

# I'll Be Home For Christmas: His Story

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Rated: PG

Submitted: April 2026

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?

Story Size: 8,510 words (48 kB as text)

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

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In the darkened storage room of the Daily Planet, not a creature was stirring. Clark Kent slipped in through the window, smiling to himself as he spun back into his normal clothes. Hiding Lois's present hadn't been easy. In fact, it probably would have been impossible if he'd been restricted to normal means. His wife was brilliant and relentless, whether she was investigating a story or snooping for her presents. It made her a daunting opponent and a wonderful ally, and he was a lucky man to have her as the latter most of the time.

"Ho, ho, ho!"

Clark froze. A figure stood in the shadows, the edges of a metallic jumpsuit shimmering in the city lights from the window. Clark closed his eyes and groaned. "No, no, no! Tempus, not today!"

"Oh, don't be like that, Kent!" Tempus stepped toward him, his features twisted into a maniacal grin. "Don't you know that Christmas is a time for truces? Have some comfort and joy: I'm here to invite you to a party!"

"A...party." Clark's eyes narrowed.

The grin on Tempus' face expanded. "Of course! I know it's unlikely, but believe it: I was just sitting in my cell, and I thought, you know what? It's a shame that the old boy scout has to work so hard during the holidays. So in the spirit of the season, I figured I'd invite you somewhere festive, with live music and tiny food on toothpicks! Of course, there is a dress code..."

"Tempus!" Clark gritted his teeth and seized Tempus' shiny collar. "Whatever you're really plotting—"

A sensation much like a bolt of lightning struck Clark before he even noticed the device in the other man's hand. The world seemed to swim around him, bending and stretching in all directions. When it finally stilled, the storage room had disappeared.

Clark blinked against the brighter light. He seemed to be standing in a massive ballroom, surrounded by people in

fine suits and elegant dresses. They all chatted softly while a string quartet at the far end of the room played 'Deck the Halls', and waiters with large platters of refreshments unobtrusively wove through the crowd. Tempus was gone, and instead of the man's collar, Clark's small and delicate hand now held a tiny gherkin on a toothpick...

...Wait...

He looked down at himself: apparently, he was no longer...well, himself. His free hand froze half-way to the strange new curves on his torso; the plunging neckline of a long, black gown showed him that the source of these shapes was...organic. Clark swallowed. Those were... He had... A dress! He was wearing a dress!

His stomach roiled and his heart began to pound. Clark forced down the growing panic and looked around again. Tempus was nowhere to be seen, and none of the party-goers seemed to be aware that anything unusual had happened. In fact, none of them were even looking his way, save for one dark-haired man in a suit that probably cost more than Clark's annual salary.

The eye-contact was apparently enough of an invitation for the man to come over, and he grinned roguishly at Clark while idly swirling the remnants of a drink. "You alright, Beautiful?"

Bruce Wayne. Clark recognized him, now. He'd only met the playboy billionaire once, but it was certainly enough to leave a lasting impression. The last fundraising gala Perry had sent them to cover was one that Mr. Wayne had invested very heavily in, though he'd also proceeded to get very heavily drunk. He then spent an absurd portion of the evening hitting on Lois, despite her protestations that she was happily married, and asking them questions about Superman which ranged from ridiculous to alarming. When Lois's rejections finally passed through the alcoholic haze and several thick layers of skull, a butler came along and gently shepherded Mr. Wayne away on the pretext of needing to take a phone call. The man would never know

how close he'd come to being put straight through a wall, and that would have been \*before\* Clark got to him.

"I'm fine." Clark winced at the higher pitch of his voice.

An arm suddenly came up around Clark's shoulders, pulling him close, and the playboy's breath was hot against his ear. "Want to get out of here?"

Despite the dramatic difference in Clark's physique, he apparently still had his Kryptonian speed. He paused at the edge of a sprawling, manicured lawn, a sonic boom rolling in his wake. The sounds of the party reached him from the mansion, perfectly uninterrupted. With any luck, Mr. Wayne would be too drunk to realize just how literally Clark had disappeared.

He scanned the unfamiliar skyline in the distance and frowned. Tempus had certainly put him in a pickle... The thought called to mind the tiny gherkin he'd found himself holding when he arrived, and which he had absently brought along with him. It was surprisingly tasty. Incinerating the toothpick prevented littering and confirmed that he also had heat-vision. He was also able to levitate, and while he had no idea about the Superman costume, at least the black dress he now wore would help camouflage him in the dark.

Clark shot up into the sky. There was exactly one person who could help him untangle this mess. If he could find her, everything would be all right.

\* \* \*

Metropolis still looked the same, though Clark knew better than to assume it was the city he knew. His wife had once found herself in another universe thanks to Tempus, and she'd told Clark how uncanny the resemblance to their own world had been. Sure enough, when he hovered over their townhouse on Hyperion, there were signs that another family was living there.

The next stop was the Daily Planet. Looking inside showed the same bullpen he remembered, and all the people there were familiar. However, Lois wasn't among them. He found her desk, but the photo they'd taken for their first anniversary wasn't on it.

There was one more place to try before going back to the drawing board: her old apartment on Carter Avenue. As soon as he neared the building, the strong, steady beating of her heart reached his ears from inside. Clark made his way to her door and knocked. The familiar sound of locks turning brought a smile to his face, though it vanished when Lois opened the door and scowled at him. "What are \*YOU\* doing here?!"

Clark took a step back in surprise but managed to recompose himself. "I need your help."

Lois crossed her arms, blocking the doorway with her body, and her scowl deepened. "What's the matter? Prince Charming turned back into a frog?"

He took a deep breath. "This might be complicated. Could I come in?"

She stared at him for a long time. Finally, curiosity apparently won out over whatever animosity she harbored. "Fine." She stepped back from the door and Clark hurried into the room. "But make this quick."

He turned to face her. "I should probably start out by explaining that I'm not who you think I am."

"Oh, I figured that out a long time ago!" Lois slid the chain back into its position and marched towards him. "You know, you really had me fooled with the whole 'sweet farm girl' act! All that stuff about wanting to make the world a better place really sounded sincere! But I guess tipping the staff at a five-star resort is a good enough way to make a difference, isn't it?!" Her voice may as well have dripped acid.

Clark sighed. "Look, can I just try to explain?"

"Sure. Fine. Explain." Lois stomped to the sofa and dropped heavily onto it. "But I don't know what you could possibly say that would make up for abandoning journalism to marry Gotham's biggest airhead!"

\* \* \*

A long time later, Lois sat unmoving on the couch, staring into the middle distance with a stunned expression. "So, you—or rather, Claire—is Superwoman?!"

Clark shrugged and landed gently on the carpet again. "I don't know that name or much about Claire. But I am Superman back in my universe, and I still have my powers in this body. So, it sounds likely." He retrieved the pair of glasses from her coffee table and slipped them back on.

She gave a slight shake of her head. "Sorry, this is just a lot to take in."

"I know." After a moment's hesitation, Clark seated himself on the other end of the couch. "If it is true, then I hope you won't let whatever grudges you have against her cloud your judgment. It's a very dangerous secret, and once something like that gets out—"

Lois held up a hand. "Don't worry about that. Actually, it's a relief." A smile broke out on her face. "If she's Superwoman, that means she's still fighting the good fight. She's still working to uphold all those ideals she talked about, rather than sitting on a beach somewhere sipping cocktails while the rest of the world falls apart." Lois leaned back against the couch and sighed. "It means the best friend I ever had wasn't just another fake."

After a long reverie, her gaze shifted back to Clark. “Hey, if you’re an alternate version of Claire, can you give me any insight on why she didn’t just tell me herself?”

Clark shrugged. “It’s a pretty big secret. If her parents are anything like mine, they would have drilled into her never to tell anyone about it.”

“You told me yours, though.” Lois tilted her head. “Does the Lois on your world know? Or...Louis, I guess?”

“Lois.” He smiled. “Yes, she knows.” After a moment, his smile dissipated. “I probably owe her an apology when I get back, though.”

“Why?” She shifted on the couch and looked at him curiously.

Clark let out a breath and stared up at the ceiling. “She had dated Lex Luthor, and I used to wonder how she could have been so dazzled as to nearly marry the man. Even if he weren’t a criminal, they still didn’t have much in common. He wasn’t someone she could exchange personal secrets with, and they wanted different things out of life. Pretty much the only thing he had to offer her was his looks and money! But...I guess those things go a little farther than I realized.” His face felt warm. “At least Luthor had more intelligence than a brick.”

Lois tilted her head back and laughed. “Well, I guess it’s easier to judge things from the outside. And hey, I bet that Bruce Wayne’s constant obliviousness makes it easy for Claire to keep her secret from him.”

His eyebrows rose. “You think she didn’t tell her own husband?”

“I wouldn’t.” Lois snorted. “I’ll grant you that he seems to be much better behaved since marrying Claire, but I can still picture him getting tipsy and yapping to everyone about his superhero wife. That man probably couldn’t keep a secret if his life depended on it!”

\* \* \*

The next morning found him and Lois riding up the elevator together as usual, save for a few major differences. Clark tugged at the hem of the sweatshirt Lois had lent him, trying to conceal that last sliver of stomach that it stubbornly wouldn’t reach. This was the first time he’d ever had to borrow any of her clothing, though there had certainly been many occasions where Lois had borrowed his. It was also the first time he’d ever slept on her couch, and—well, mercifully, he could float.

The noise of the newsroom hushed at their arrival, and everyone’s eyes were fixed on them as they made their way down the ramp to the bullpen. They had just reached Lois’s

desk when Perry approached them, staring perplexedly at Clark. “Claire?”

“Uh, hi, Chief!” Clark smiled and tried to look like everything was normal.

Perry looked back and forth between him and Lois, who had just taken off her coat and was now booting up her computer. “Darlin’, is everything all right?”

Clark waited for Lois’s reply, only to realize that Perry had been addressing him. “Uh, yeah. Everything’s just fine.”

A frown creased Perry’s forehead. “I heard from an old friend that there’s a rumor going around that you and your husband arrived at a party together but left separately. Heck, they’re saying that you eighty-sixed the place before cocktails were even served!”

Clark winced. He hadn’t known at the time how his departure would reflect on his counterpart, but he should clearly try to be more careful in the future.

“Honey, if there’s anything you need to talk about, you know Alice and I are here for you.” Perry rested a hand on Clark’s shoulder. “Anything at all.”

“Thanks, Perry, but everything’s fine. Really.” Clark offered a tiny smile. “I just...uh...”

“She got a really hot lead and needed to share it with me.” Lois leaned back from her computer and looked Perry in the eye. “We’ll let you know if it pans out.”

Perry gave them both a long, assessing look, then nodded. “All right. Tell me if I’ve got a new front page.”

Lois flashed a grin up at him. “We will, Chief!”

He turned to Clark again. “But if you do need to talk, my door is still open.” He went back to his office, leaving the door ajar just as he said.

Not long after Perry’s departure, Jimmy came bounding up to them. “CK! Or, uh, I guess CW now?” He gave an awkward chuckle. “Long time no see, huh? How, uh, how have you been?” He wrung his hands together while watching Clark with a strange expression.

“Uh, good, thanks.” Clark gave what he hoped was an easy-going smile. “And you?”

“Oh, good. Keeping busy, you know.” Jimmy sniffed and drew himself up to his full height. “Got to help Perry keep this place running, you know? Can’t let things get out of hand for a second, so it’s busy, busy, busy.”

“I see.” Clark glanced at Lois. She had bitten down on her lip and was staring fixedly at her computer screen.

“So, do you need anything?” Jimmy scratched the back of his neck. “Coffee? Research? I overheard the chief saying something about you needing to talk, so...if you need a shoulder to cry on...”

Lois pushed her chair back a little from the desk. “Actually, Jimmy, we need a list of any scientists or laboratories that might be researching parallel universes.”

Jimmy’s forehead scrunched. “Parallel universes? Um, sure! I’m on it.” He turned back to Clark with a toothy grin. “Time to work my magic! So, um, welcome back!” With a wave, he dashed off.

Clark leaned towards Lois and lowered his voice. “Is Jimmy okay?”

“He has a crush on you,” she whispered back.

His eyebrows rose. “Oh!”

Lois turned back to her computer and opened a web-search program. “I think we should start by looking for anyone else who might know about this stuff. From what you told me about that Tempus guy, he isn’t the type to stay hidden; so if he were around, we’d hear something.”

A sound from the floor below them made Clark’s back stiffen.

“—brings you to the Planet, Mr. Wayne?”

“Oh, just dropping in on an old acquaintance.”

With his x-ray vision, Clark found the elevator as it came up the shaft. Bruce Wayne was riding inside with a few of their coworkers. Clark made it to the storage room just as the elevator chimed.

He kept watch on Mr. Wayne as the man sauntered down the ramp, smiling in every direction and waving at everyone. Here indeed was a man who didn’t have a thought in his head or a care in the world. Clark started to roll his eyes but then paused: why would a man whose wife had vanished be smiling and care-free? But on the other hand, if Bruce Wayne really didn’t have any concerns about it, then why was he at her former place of work? Clark frowned, looking through the wall again.

Lois was still staring at the spot where Clark had been when Mr. Wayne reached her desk and leaned against it. “Lois! Long time, no see! How’s tracks?”

Her confused expression was quickly replaced with a polite smile. “I think you mean ‘how’s tricks’. Work’s been good. How are you?”

Mr. Wayne shrugged. “Oh, about what you’d expect. Say, has Claire gotten in touch with you, recently?”

“No. Was she supposed to?” Lois managed to sound perfectly innocent.

Another shrug, and he idly picked up a stack of papers from her desk. “I thought she’d mentioned it, but maybe she was talking about something else. Who can say?” He seemed to suddenly notice the papers he was now holding and began flipping through the pages. “Say, what are you working on?” The top few pages found their way to the back of the stack, and he fished out a page from the middle to scrutinize.

Lois’s eye twitched as she leaped up to take the papers from his hands. “Nothing you need to worry about! If it pans out, you can read about it in the Planet!”

While she attempted to return the papers to their proper order, Mr. Wayne slipped a hand into his pocket and leaned over to look at her monitor. A frown crossed his face, but it was gone by the time she looked up. “Aw, no sneak previews of tomorrow’s frontlines?”

Lois closed her eyes and sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. That fast, Mr. Wayne’s hand left his pocket and darted under her desk. “They’re \*head\* lines, and they go on the front \*page\*.”

Something electronic began to whine at the range above normal hearing. Clark’s jaw fell open.

“Right, right. Something like that.” Mr. Wayne nodded agreeably. “Well, look: this has been fun, but I’ve really got to get going. We should get together for lunch, sometime! Let me give you the new number...” He fumbled for a card in his wallet, then looked up at her with a confused frown. “Or did Claire already give you the number when you talked to her?”

“I haven’t talked to her,” Lois sweetly reminded him.

“Right. Right. Ah, here it is!” He handed her the card, beaming like a little boy who’d successfully tied his own shoes. “Just give a call when you’re not busy scooping your bylines!”

“That’s not—!” Lois sighed again and took the card with a tight smile. “I will. Thank you.”

The billionaire made his way back to the elevator without any further incidents. Once it began to descend, Clark headed back to Lois’s desk. The device underneath it continued to whine.

Lois leaned back in her chair, rubbing her forehead, and looked up just as he approached. “Oh, there you are! I guess you noticed that Bruce Wayne was here. You know, I hope for Claire’s sake that idiot is at least good in—”

Clark held a finger to his lips.

Her mouth snapped shut, though she frowned at him in confusion.

He took a notepad and pen from her desk and scribbled the words "Say nothing and come with me".

She nodded and grabbed her coat. Without a word, they headed for the stairwell.

\* \* \*

The roof of the Daily Planet was covered in a thin layer of snow, and more flakes drifted down from the clouds overhead. Clark went to the railing and scanned the city below for any signs of Bruce Wayne. Finally, he turned back to face Lois. "Okay, I think we can talk here."

She pulled her coat tighter around herself and looked at him with a worried expression. "What's wrong?"

After a moment's consideration, Clark decided to just come right out and say it: "He bugged your desk."

"Wait, what? Who?" Lois looked confused.

"Bruce Wayne bugged your desk."

She stared at him. "You're...kidding. Bruce Wayne? The man who needs a butler to remind him how to put on pants?"

Clark nodded. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, but he did. He distracted you, planted a listening device, and I'm pretty sure he tried to trick you into admitting you'd been in contact with Claire. It was...more subtle than I ever would have thought him capable of being."

Lois gaped at him. "Incredible..." She stared into the distance for a moment, then brought her eyes back to his. "Do you think maybe he was swapped out too? I mean, maybe there's another universe out there where Bruce Wayne is smart?"

Clark thought it over. "I guess it's possible, but then why all the subterfuge in looking for my counterpart?"

"Well, maybe in his world, Claire is some kind of supervillain or something, and...and..." Her breath puffed out in front of her. "I have no idea. Still, if we're going to keep a low profile while working on this, we'll probably need to do something about that bug. Can you destroy it?"

He grimaced. "I could, but it would probably just tip him off that we found it, and that might raise questions."

"We'll have to work somewhere else, then." She blew on her hands and shoved them in her pockets. "We could try to go back to my apartment, unless you can think of somewhere safer."

Clark stared out over the horizon. "How do you feel about a flight to Kansas?"

\* \* \*

The old farmhouse was just like the one Clark had grown up in. Hopefully, the people inside were also the same. He landed behind a wood-pile and set Lois on her feet. Even though she wasn't *his* Lois, he still kept hold of her hand as they made their way through the ankle-high snow to the kitchen door. If she thought it was weird of him, she didn't comment.

The door swung open just as they reached the back step. "Claire!" His mother came outside in her slippers and pulled him into a tight hug. Despite the difference in universes, the comfort of her touch was the same.

Clark allowed himself to relax and return the hug. "Hi, Mom."

She pulled back and studied his face, cradling it in her hands. "Honey, what happened? Bruce called last night asking if you were here, and this morning he said you never came home!"

"He thought I came here last night?" Clark's eyebrows rose. "So, he knows I can fly?"

His mom frowned in confusion. "What?! Why wouldn't he—" Her gaze moved behind him to land on Lois, and her eyes widened. She looked back to Clark. "Claire? What's going on?"

Clark grimaced. "It's really complicated. Could we come in and I'll try to explain?"

Her mouth pressed into a firm line. "Please do."

\* \* \*

The door closed behind them, shutting out the cold. Clark went to the table and pulled a chair out for Lois, taking the one beside it for himself. His mother stood by the stove, watching them, her arms crossed and her expression wary. Clark looked her in the eyes. "I know a lot of this is going to sound completely crazy, and some of it might even be a little hard to follow. But please hear me out, and—" His gaze fell on the large jars lining the counter beside her. "—are those your famous sweet pickles?"

His mom nodded, the corner of her mouth twitching.

Clark swallowed down the building saliva. How long had it been since he'd tasted any of his mom's homemade pickles? Months? Years? For some reason, he'd failed to take advantage of the opportunities he'd had back in his own world. Her recipe was incomparable, from the perfect crunch of the cucumber to the salty and flavorful brine...

A jar appeared on the table in front of him, and his mom wordlessly unscrewed the lid.

"Thank you!" He reached for one of the plump, green delicacies and bit into it with gusto. It was even more heavenly than he remembered! He opened his eyes to find Lois giving him an odd look. "Um, sorry. What were we talking about, again?"

His mom's amused expression quickly sobered. "About why you left your husband wondering where you are, and why you flew a reporter to our house." She looked up at Lois. "No offense, dear."

Lois waved the comment away. "It's okay, I understand. And don't worry: none of this is going to print." She watched Clark's enthusiastic chewing for a while, scrutinized the jar of pickles, and reached in to try one.

Clark swallowed another bite. "Lois can keep a secret, Mom. I trust her with my life."

His mom looked between the two of them, a frown creasing her forehead. "And...why do you trust her that deeply?"

He sighed, polished off the remains of his snack, and reached back into the jar for a fresh one. "Well, like I said, it sounds completely crazy..."

\* \* \*

By the time Clark reached the end of his narrative, his mother had sunk into the chair across from them. Now, she sat watching Clark with wide eyes and a slightly befuddled expression. "So, this Tempus character...sent you to another universe...to change the future?"

Clark nodded. "That's right." He took another bite of pickle.

She frowned. "A future created by H.G. Wells?"

"No, by Superman." He paused, chewing thoughtfully. "Actually, H.G. Wells said it was the descendants of Superman and—" He hesitated. "—and my wife."

His mom rested her chin on her hands and gave him a sharp look. "Your world's Lois, you mean."

Lois turned to him with wide eyes.

Clark squirmed a little. "...Yeah." He straightened and met Lois's gaze. "I'm sorry for not telling you. I guess I just figured it wasn't relevant."

"Right. Of course not." Lois huffed. "Secrets are just a \*thing\* with you and Claire, aren't they?"

His mom chuckled. "They are, Dear. I know Jonathan and I are at least partly to blame." She looked at Clark again. "So, is your wife expecting?"

Clark shook his head, staring down at the small stub of pickle remaining in his hand. "We actually can't have children." He popped the stub into his mouth, letting its

comforting flavor lessen the hurt. "I'm not sure what H.G. Wells meant when he referred to our descendants; he was probably being metaphorical. Either that, or maybe someday we'll get cleared for adoption. But when we looked into the possibility of having kids the natural way, the test results showed that it was genetically impossible."

His hand felt around the bottom of the jar, but he realized with a start that nothing was left in the brine. He looked up at his mother, chagrined. "Oh! Mom, I'm so sorry; I didn't realize how many I'd been eating!"

She smiled softly. "It's all right, dear."

He stared at the depleted jar in disbelief. "I don't know if Claire's taste-buds are different from mine or if pickles just taste better in this universe, but they seem to really hit the spot. It almost feels like I \*need\* them!" He licked a drop of brine from his fingers.

Lois stilled. "You mean, like a...craving?"

Clark shrugged. "I hadn't thought about it, but I guess that's—" He froze.

His mother nodded.

His pulse pounded in his ears. Clark closed his eyes and tried to tune it out, listening for any other sounds within his body. When he heard the tiny flutter in his mid-section, he opened his eyes with a gasp.

His mom was watching him silently. He met her gaze, almost afraid to ask the question. "She's...? \*I'm\*...?"

"Just a couple months along, we figure. Bruce doesn't know yet." His mom seemed to think for a minute. "Honey..." She reached across the table to put a hand over his. "Clark. If we don't find Tempus, or anyone who knows how to send you back...what's going to happen if you have to stay?"

Clark stared at her. It was a possibility he'd been afraid to contemplate when the only thing at stake was returning to his wife and parents. But, this... "No." He shook his head. "No. I'm sorry. I can't..."

His mother looked crushed.

"Maybe we can be friends when he—or she—is old enough to understand the situation, but I can't pretend to be this kid's mom." He slumped in his chair. "That's just a bridge too far, even for me!"

Lois shared a surprised look with his mother. "But... you'd still go through with...having it?"

He stared at her in confusion. "Well, of course. This isn't my body, so it's not really my choice, is it? I have no doubt that this kid is wanted."

His mom nodded. "Very."

"So who am I to destroy someone else's happiness for my own convenience?" He gingerly rested a hand on his belly, Claire's belly. If they did manage to switch back, she would come home to the life she wanted.

His mother sighed with relief.

"Of course, I have no idea what to tell her husband." Clark raked a hand through his hair and was caught by surprise as his fingers continued to drag through the strands for far longer than he was used to. He shook his hand free.

"Just tell him the truth, Dear, the same way you told Lois and me." His mom caught up his other hand and patted it. "He won't like the situation, but he'll be able to understand and deal with it."

Clark looked at her warily. "You seem sure of that."

She nodded. "I am. In fact, rely on him to help us get you home and my daughter back."

"What kind of person is he, exactly?" Clark pulled his hand back and tilted his head in confusion. "Back home, I only knew Bruce Wayne to be a playboy and an idiot, but after what happened at the Planet, I'm not sure what to think!"

His mom studied Lois for a moment before turning back to him. "He's the man my daughter chose to share her life with. Her whole life: all of it. You want me to trust you about Lois; trust us about Bruce Wayne."

"Fine. I'll go see if I can find him." Clark pushed his chair back and stood.

She held up a hand. "You won't need to; he's coming here." At his shocked expression, she smiled. "You're not the only one who comes to us when there's a crisis. He'll be needing his parents, and as of last year, that's Jonathan and me."

\* \* \*

His father's pickup truck rumbled up the driveway. Clark thought he heard two people inside, but when the kitchen door opened, only his dad entered the house. He paused in the doorway, staring at Clark, then immediately rushed forward and pulled him into a bear hug. "There's my little pumpkin! Honey, you've had everyone so worried!"

"Uh, hi Dad." Clark awkwardly returned the hug.

His mother turned away from the sink, wiping her hands on a dish-towel. "Jonathan, we've got a strange situation going on."

"How strange?" He loosened his grip on Clark, lightly resting his hands on Clark's arms and studying him with a worried expression.

"Child-in-a-cornfield strange." She nodded towards Lois, who was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee.

His father's eyebrows climbed. "Lois Lane? What brings you here?"

She grimaced, setting her cup down on the table. "It's a long story, Mr. Kent. It's better if I let Clark explain." One hand motioned towards Clark.

"Who?" His dad followed the motion, only to look down at Clark with a confused frown.

His mother shook her head and rested a hand on his dad's shoulder. "Never mind, it's complicated. For now, let's just say that Lois is in on the family secret."

"WHAT?!" His head snapped up to gape at Lois.

Clark took hold of the other shoulder. "It's okay, Dad. We can trust her."

He stared at Clark. "Pumpkin, what's going on?" The worried frown began to deepen.

Clark winced. "It really is complicated. I'll tell you everything, but I think I should talk to Mr. Wayne first. Was he the one in the truck with you, just now?"

His dad's eyebrows flew into his hairline. "\*Mr. Wayne\*? Claire?!"

"Is he here?" Clark pressed.

"Uh, yeah." His dad pointed in the direction of the old barn. "He was really worked up, so he went straight to the barn to tackle that old tractor."

"Thanks, Dad." Clark went to the door and took a deep, steadying breath before heading out to find the man who'd married his counterpart.

The door closed behind him just as his mother spoke. "It might even be weirder than the cornfield, Dear."

\* \* \*

Footprints in the snow led from the pickup truck to the barn, just as his dad had said. Their course took him past the woodpile, where his and Lois's own steps were still plainly visible, and it seemed Mr. Wayne had taken a few steps towards that trail before turning and moving on. Hopefully, his mom was right about Mr. Wayne being able to understand this latest craziness.

The footsteps ended just at the barn door. It hung slightly ajar, creaking in protest when Clark pushed it further open and let a shaft of daylight bisect the shadows. The tractor

was propped up on cinder-blocks beneath a hanging work-light, though the light itself wasn't on. His dad's toolbox lay in the middle of the floor. "Hello?" Clark stepped inside. "Is anyone here?"

A faint "pop" went off in his ears, and Clark's limbs suddenly felt stiff. A startled yelp escaped him just as his entire body went rigid. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't move; his muscles wouldn't even respond.

Shadows moved at the edge of his sight, and a figure stepped into his peripheral vision. Clark tried in vain to turn his head. Eventually, the figure circled around between him and the tractor, and Clark could see plainly who it was. Tempus grinned. "Hey, Clark, how's it hanging?"

Clark couldn't force his jaw to work.

Tempus strolled up to Clark and leaned against him as though he were a pillar. "You know, I really had such high hopes for this plan: change history in two worlds with one little swap. It was brilliant! And at first, it even seemed to work: imagine how excited I was when I skipped ahead a few centuries and found out there was war in the future, instead of that insipid Peace Council!"

He held up a strange metal tube, tossed it in the air, and caught it in his hand again. "Tragically, it turns out that what those morons call 'war' is really just a glorified game of freeze-tag!" He scowled at the tube, tucked it into his pocket, and turned his glare onto Clark.

"This is getting very tiresome, Kent. It seems that no matter what I do, your goody-goodness keeps infecting the rest of the world! Trying to kill you as a baby didn't work. Kidnapping your wife didn't work. Trapping you in a time pocket didn't work." Tempus stepped back and reached into the inner pocket of his vest. "But then, I remembered the words of the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century." His mouth curled into a sadistic grin as he pulled out a revolver and leveled it straight at Clark's head. "'Why don't ya just shoot him?'"

A wooden pole slammed down onto Tempus' wrist, sending a flash of green just past Clark's head with a thunderous blast. The revolver dropped to the floor as the time-traveler clutched his hand. Bruce Wayne stepped into the light, turning the pole so that the long, metal tines at the other end were now right under Tempus' nose. "This is a pitchfork."

He swung the handle of the pitchfork into Tempus's leg, eliciting a fresh howl of pain. "Years ago, my father-in-law gave me a very detailed lecture about its uses." The fork's handle now swept into the man's stomach, and Tempus, already having to balance on one leg, fell backwards onto the floor of the barn. "Specifically: how it can be used on anyone foolish enough to hurt his little girl."

Bruce stood over Tempus and speared the massive tines into the floor, barely missing the man's inner thigh. "Let's see how well I was listening."

\* \* \*

When the brutality was over, Mr. Wayne fetched a coil of rope down from the wall and began expertly tying Tempus with it. Given that the man was now unconscious, it was probably an unnecessary precaution. Clark tried to call out to the billionaire, but without a functioning tongue, the pitiful sound that escaped his throat bore no resemblance to words.

"One moment." Mr. Wayne fastened the last knot and gave a satisfied grunt. Afterwards, he stood in front of Clark, looking him over. "Let me see something, here..." He took Clark's arm in both hands and very carefully flexed it at the elbow. "One for yes, two for no: did that hurt?"

"Uh-uh," Clark managed.

"Do you feel anything?"

"Uh."

"Good." He released Clark's arm and resumed his study. "He said war became a game of freeze-tag. That must mean they use non-lethal weaponry. Paralyzing someone permanently wouldn't be much different from killing them, and bullets would be cheaper. So, either there's a way to undo the effect, or..."

Clark managed to work his jaw.

"...it eventually wears off." He folded his arms and met Clark's gaze. "Mr. Clark Kent, I presume?"

"Uh, yeah." His limbs were still rigid, but at least now his mouth could move, and the arm Mr. Wayne had manipulated was slightly less stiff than the other.

His eyes narrowed. "That explains a lot."

Clark lowered his head, but the effort for a full nod was a bit too much. "I'm sorry for causing you trouble. All this must have driven you up a wall."

Mr. Wayne stared at him for a moment, blinking, and then a laugh burst out of him. "Now *that* is more like how my wife would behave." He sobered quickly and met Clark's eyes again. "How do we get her back?"

Clark turned his head towards Tempus. "He's the one who swapped us, so unless my friend Wells can find me, he's the best bet for putting us back." His eyes slid back to the supposed playboy. "You, uh, really did a number on him, Mr. Wayne."

"Bruce, please." He sighed, and his hands clenched and unclenched. "It's been...a long time since I watched a

stranger pull a gun on someone I care about. I admit it's not something I can handle very well." He looked at Tempus. "Of course, now it seems we're going to have to wake him up somehow, so we can have a little chat."

Lois's voice reached them from the door of the barn. "Any way I can help?"

\* \* \*

Bruce threw a bucket of cold water onto Tempus's face. The man sputtered, groaned, and slowly opened his eyes. "Auntie Em, is that you?" His gaze darted over the three people in the barn, and he groaned again. "Great. Just great. I've got Brainless, the Man of Rust, and a psycho who needs to ask the wizard for a therapist."

Lois stepped forward, crossing her arms. "Tempus, right? You seem to have upset a very dangerous man. Now, Clark over there tells me that you love violence, but I bet there's still an exception for violence directed against you. If I'm wrong, though, then Clark and I can simply leave."

Tempus's eyes widened and flicked up to Bruce. His voice became a squeak. "What do you want?"

"I think you know." Bruce leaned against the pitchfork and loomed over the bound time-traveler. "He wants to go home—" He pointed to Clark. "—and I want my wife back. Now, either you're the man who can make that happen, or you're just a man who made me very, very angry." His eyes narrowed. "Which is it?"

"The first one! The first one!" Tempus swallowed. "There's a beacon... It's more like a homing device, really. I disabled it when I escaped..."

Bruce shifted his grip on the pitchfork.

He spoke faster. "But I can fix it again and then Wells or somebody will come and I-can-swap-them-back-I-swear!"

Clark met the inquiring looks of the other two. One shoulder was finally loose enough to sort of shrug. "He seems to be telling the truth. It would be easier to tell if his heart wasn't racing from panic."

"Hrm." Bruce glared down at Tempus again. "It could be a trick."

"No tricks!" Tempus wriggled a bit in the rope, but it didn't give. "If you don't trust me to swap them, Wells can do it himself when he gets here. We shop from the same catalogs. All I need to do is fix the beacon."

Bruce's glare deepened. "Right. So we untie you, and the so-called 'beacon' turns out to be a weapon or a method of escape."

Lois stepped forward. "Maybe I could fix it. Get the device off of him and have him tell me what to do."

"Lois, no!" Clark forced one arm to move slightly towards her. "If something goes wrong, you could get hurt, or lost in time, or even killed!"

"Don't worry about it." She nodded towards Bruce. "I've got some pretty good insurance, right here."

Bruce turned to Tempus, his grip on the pitchfork visibly tightening. "Well?"

Tempus whimpered. "I'll tell her what to do. It'll be fine."

"Fine then." Bruce looked back at Clark.

Clark sighed. "Fine."

Tempus closed his eyes. "Utopia's Re-Harmonizing Center had better not be showing Green Acres in the rec room again."

\* \* \*

After an interminably long time, Clark was finally able to move from the spot he'd been standing in while the others worked on Tempus's device. He stretched, took a few aimless steps, and sighed with relief. "That was unpleasant."

The work-light shone brightly down on the tractor. Lois sat in its seat, staring down at the pieces in her lap as she tried to fit them together the way Tempus had described. Clark walked up to her and rested a hand on the tractor's frame. "Do you want me to take over, in case it's dangerous?"

Bruce's voice cut in before Lois could reply. "No."

Lois glanced at Clark. "I can get it."

"But I'm invulnerable," Clark pointed out. "You're not."

Lois looked up from the device again and met his eyes. "Tell you what: how about we bet one of your mom's homemade pickles that I can do this?"

Her meaning was clear: it wouldn't be just his own life he'd be risking for hers. Clark slowly nodded and backed away from the tractor.

Some time later, they all stood in the glow of the work-light, staring down at the device in Lois's hands. She took a deep breath. "Well, here goes nothing..."

Bruce pulled Clark further back as Lois clicked the last component into place. Nothing seemed to happen: nothing glowed, or beeped, or hummed. Lois frowned. "Did I do it right?"

The hairs on the back of Clark's neck began to tingle, and he whipped around. The space in front of the barn door shimmered slightly. All at once, the light began to bend in all directions. A glowing blob coalesced into the shape of a sleigh, and the time machine appeared.

Clark's attention snapped to Wells' passengers, particularly the familiar-looking man in spandex seated behind Lois. "You!"

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

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

"—change us back!"

Wells held up a placating hand; the other gripped a somewhat-familiar 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 Clark. When it stopped, he was taller and standing next to a dark-haired woman. He looked down at himself, patting his body with his hands to ensure it was real. In the corner of his mind, he was aware of the woman doing the same. "It worked! I'm—"

"—me again! Bruce!"

He grinned up at his wife and sped towards her. "Lois!" He gathered her into his arms and kissed her, savoring every second of it.

When the kiss finally broke, he set her back down on her feet, his hands still resting lightly on her hips even as hers still cradled his jaw. She ran her thumb along his cheekbone and looked into his eyes. "There's something you should know: someone else knows the secret, now."

Clark looked towards the back of the barn, where the real Claire was still indulging in her own reunion with Bruce. "Let me guess: playboy billionaire Bruce Wayne?"

"Batman, actually." She jerked her thumb towards a corner by the door, where a dark figure in a cape and cowl stood shuffling awkwardly next to her counterpart. Lois shifted her gaze to the couple behind Clark and frowned. "Wait, Bruce Wayne?"

Clark raised his eyebrows at Lois. "Batman?" He thought for a moment. "That...explains a lot, actually."

The other couple finally drifted towards them, each with an arm around the other, and Claire reached her free hand out towards Clark. "Um, hi. I'm Claire Wayne."

"Clark Kent." He shook her hand, keeping his other arm wrapped around Lois. "It's nice to finally meet you. Your husband is...full of surprises."

She smiled at Lois. "And so is your wife." Claire turned towards the other Lois, who was now standing alone. "Lois, I owe you an apology. And probably a few explanations. Is it all right if we talk, later?"

The other woman shrugged. "Well, I suppose I can spare a few minutes for the jobless trophy wife." A smile took the sting out of her words. "Sure, we can talk."

"Thanks. As for you..." Claire sped to a patch of shadow and wrapped her arms around the figure hiding there. "Thank you for everything!"

While Bruce Wayne strolled off to have a word with the man his wife was hugging, Clark turned to his wife's counterpart and pulled her into a quick hug as well. "Thank \*you\* for everything."

"Don't mention it." She gave a sheepish smile.

"If there's anything I can do to repay you," Clark began.

The other Lois shook her head. "You already gave me back my best friend. I'd say we're even."

Lois slipped her arm back around Clark's waist and smiled at the other woman. "Thank you for helping mine."

\* \* \*

The old song lyric was true: there was no place like home for the holidays. In the townhouse on Hyperion Avenue, the morning sun danced over the ornaments on the tree, making them sparkle. The scent of his mother's gingerbread wafted from the kitchen, and both she and his father were on the sofa laughing heartily at the argument unfolding on the living room floor.

"In what universe does Lois Lane \*not\* want to go first?" Clark drew himself up into a kneeling position and held the box out towards Lois again, giving it a slight shake so that it rattled enticingly.

Lois leaned away from him, nearly bumping into the lower branches of the tree, but kept her grip on the smaller, foil-wrapped box. Her eyes glittered with mischief. "Oh, I do want to go first. I'm \*giving\* you your gift first, see?"

"Aha!" Clark laughed. "The truth comes out. All right, I'll open it..."

"HA!" Lois grinned triumphantly and thrust her box in his direction.

Clark smirked. "...after you open yours."

Their battle was interrupted by the phone ringing. After exchanging a look with his wife, Clark stood and went to answer it. "Hello?"

"Kent?" The gravelly voice on the other end was familiar.

Clark's eyebrows rose. "Bruce?!" Lois and his parents looked up at him in curiosity.

"Yes. I won't keep you long. I just..." There was a pause. "Given the recent situation, it seemed appropriate to call and make sure that you were having a good holiday."

At once, his mother was on her feet. "Is that the man you and Lois told us about?" She crossed the living room even as Clark nodded, and she put her hand out for the phone. "Let me speak to him." As soon as Clark relinquished the phone, she brought it to her ear. "Hello, this is Martha Kent."

"Ah, hello, Mrs. Kent." Bruce sounded surprised.

His mom smiled. "Martha, please. Listen—Bruce, right?"

"Yes?"

She glanced at the others in the room. Lois and his father nodded. Clark, sensing the idea, added his agreement as well. His mom turned her attention back to the phone. "Bruce, I don't know what your plans are for today, but if you have time, we were hoping you might be able to join us for Christmas dinner."

"Well, Mrs...um...Martha... That is quite an honor, but I..." There was another long pause. "...I suppose, if it wouldn't be intruding..."

She waved a hand even though he couldn't possibly see it. "Oh, Honey, after everything you did to help bring my son home, you're more than welcome here! Now, we were thinking of serving around one o'clock; would that work out for you if Clark gives you a lift?"

"Um...yes?"

"Great!" She grinned. "We'll see you later, then. In the meantime, have a merry Christmas, Bruce!"

"Ah, and you as well."

She thrust the phone back into Clark's hands and smiled at him before returning to the couch.

Clark brought the phone back to his ear. "See you soon, Bruce. Merry Christmas!"

"...Merry Christmas." The phone clicked, and the dial-tone began to hum.

Clark set the phone down on the end table and resettled himself on the floor by the tree, putting an arm around Lois. "Well, that was a nice surprise."

"Very." Lois snuggled against his side and raised the box so that its ribbon brushed against his nose. "And speaking of surprises, open your present!"

He tilted his head back and laughed. "All right, I give!"

"No, \*I\* give. You get!" Lois grinned impishly at him.

"Fine!" Still chuckling, Clark took the box from her hands. Lois watched him intently as he tugged the ribbon away and pulled apart the lead foil. The plain cardboard box gave no indication of its contents. He lifted the lid, finally exposing a coffee mug.

"A...coffee mug?" It was a perplexing choice for a Christmas present, but any gift from Lois was still a treasure to be cherished. He pressed a kiss against her temple. "Thank you, Honey. I'll be sure to use it every morning!"

She chuckled. "Look at it and tell me what you think."

"All right, let's see here..." He lifted it out of the box and read the slogan on its side. "World's Greatest Da—" He broke off.

Lois slipped her arms around him. "Merry Christmas, Clark."

**And A Happy New Year**