

At the Closing of the Year

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Rating: T

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After five Christmases together, Lois liked to think she knew Clark's pattern fairly well. A week after they'd finally gotten all the shopping done - at the exact point when a *sane* person would go home, have hot cocoa, and mock the idiots still stuck in the mall - Clark would inevitably decide he had to get one more thing for the kids. Just *one* more. Usually some completely obscure item available at only one store, and in limited stock. Since flying was faster than calling during the holiday season, and Lois had long since stopped trusting him to shop for the twins without buying up the whole store, that meant she got to soar all over Metropolis. Sometimes it was even the whole Eastern Seaboard, hitting every location of a franchise, to find Clark's Must-Have Gift.

Quite frankly, The Epic Trek for the Perfect Present Ever was getting a little *old*. Especially when the new venture was eating up all of his free time; Lois couldn't help suspecting that this year's last-minute spree was largely fueled by guilt over the fact that his time at home had once again been limited by his duty to the world at large. But to be fair, it wasn't every year that the three best-known superheroes decided to get organized and reach out to everyone with powers - or just a costume and a hell of a lot of training. The newly-formed Justice League of America *was* a good idea; Lois herself had editorialized about it several times. Finally, all the heroes in the country were getting together, exchanging information, helping each other. And it was honestly high time that something like this had occurred.

She remembered one hero who, even a year ago, would've been completely overwhelmed by his local mad-scientist-wannabe. Back then, if Kal-El caught it, he was the one to jump in and bail out the people who were inspired by him but not quite up to his level of power. And if Kal-El didn't catch it, well, the local hero might just get killed, in which case her husband would beat himself up over it for a long, long time. And that had never been a situation that thrilled Lois.

The newly-formed Justice League of America was supposed to put a stop to his bouts of guilt. Whenever one of these maniacs cropped up, trying to be the next Lex Luthor, the League knew about it. From what Kal-El said, they had people scanning the news outlets constantly, looking for the kinds of things that her husband would've had to listen for just a few years ago.

If the situation was beyond the capabilities of the local heroes, the fledgling group got some of its members to offer assistance. Due to her help, Lois had inside knowledge she couldn't print, and it amazed her to hear about the sheer number of people with powers who

were out there trying to do good. And *her husband* had inspired many of these new heroes; he'd been the first to put on a cape and help the world in the public eye.

Well, Batman might've been doing it a little earlier, but he had deliberately let himself remain an urban legend. The two men were friends now, all differences of opinion remaining mostly aside, and Lois had been highly amused to learn that Bruce Wayne, the spoiled playboy with more money than brains, was actually a hero as driven as her own husband.

Meanwhile, though, Kal-El was putting a lot of time and effort into making it work. That was his nature; if he believed in something, he couldn't give it less than his best. Lois had to admit that she could see where this would benefit him, too - soon there would be nights when he could truly relax and not worry about the state of the world, secure in the knowledge that other heroes were on the lookout.

The only problem was, they hadn't quite gotten to that stage yet, and *her* hero wasn't home as often as he really ought to be. In light of that, Lois was less than surprised to find herself high above the ground, three days before Christmas, having to bury her face in his shoulder to keep the snowflakes out of her eyes as they headed through a small snowstorm. Once again, she tried not to sound too plaintive. "Remind me *why* are we going to Asheville, again?"

"Because only three stores have that limited-edition truck in stock, and Mast General is the closest," he told her, wrapping his cape around her shoulders more securely.

"And remind me *why* can't our son have one of the trucks at the toy store in town?"

"Because none of those are an exact match for Ma's truck. And it has a fully-detailed engine."

Lois rolled her eyes heavenward. Both twins *loved* the farm - unlike Lois herself, who was perfectly happy with city life, Jason and Kala really enjoyed the chance to occasionally go country. Jason in particular had fallen in love with the farm truck, an ancient vehicle that had been in the family since it was new. Somehow it was still running, and Jason had vowed to drive it one day. Lois shuddered at the thought. She herself had learned to drive in a beat-up old Chevy belonging to some friends, but she wanted her kids to have something a little more modern and safe. Something with seat belts, perhaps. *Not* a decrepit farm truck with no third gear.

It was a few years before she had to worry about that, anyway, so it didn't hurt to indulge Jason's obsession right now. Lois succumbed to the inevitable with a heavy sigh, and braced herself for the endless crush of the holiday crowds.

As they made their way into the warmth of the two-story general store, Clark had to fight a smile at the way Lois surveyed the layout of merchandise in front of her before even leaving the doorway. His wife was a good person to have at his side in a hostile crowd, Clark reflected with amusement. She was small and agile, able to dart between slower-moving shoppers like a collie herding sheep, but if people got nasty, she could take care of herself. She lived by the saying that the best defense is a preemptive offense, and the moment someone even began to *think* about barging into her, she was ready with a snarl and a glare. Followed by the infamous Lane elbow, if necessary.

Not that he completely *approved* of her behavior, but it was so very Lois. And as long as no one got hurt, so very entertaining to watch. Clark had spotted the truck they wanted, at the back of the shop, but two women were right in front of him arguing over who'd picked up a garish reindeer-patterned sweater first. Lois stepped up, looked at the sweater, and gave a

sneer of such disbelieving disgust that both women stopped mid-sentence. "People actually buy those?" Lois said with frosty disdain, and while the two women were both trying to decide if they still wanted the item, Lois swept around them and toward her goal.

Clark followed in her wake, watching in amusement as Lois skirted around a child having a temper tantrum. At last, the truck they were looking for was in plain sight ... four feet above her head. "Well, dammit." Lois turned to look around for a ladder, muttering under her breath the whole time about height discrimination.

Unable to resist, Clark settled his hands around her waist and lifted her easily. Lois had to stifle her impulse to swear, but she couldn't really complain this time of year. It wouldn't surprise anyone that a man his size could lift her up like that for a few seconds while she grabbed the toy.

That little chore out of the way, the reporter glared at him in a way that made it very clear to him the only reason *he* wasn't getting the Lane elbow in his ribs was the fact that it would hurt Lois more than it would him. This continued all the way to the register, where Lois discovered the credit card machine was down and actually had to write a check, then glowered at Clark all the way out of the shop. That only amused him more, and that was just enough for Lois to get fed up with it. "All right, wise guy, mission accomplished," she muttered mutinously. "Let's get out of here - Richard said we *have* to get the kids by seven, or else he's giving them to the zoo."

"Oh, we have plenty of time," Clark told her with an ease that set her teeth on edge. Didn't the man understand that they were three days out from the most important kid-day of the year? That there was a ton of stuff left to do? Outside the bubble of her thoughts, Clark was continuing in the same tone, "And Lana asked me to check on the cabin since we're in the area."

Glancing down at her watch, his wife just looked at him in mystified exasperation. Of all the damn times for the cheerleader to have them running errands. In the last few years, Lana had purchased a house on Paradise Island in the Bahamas, and a log cabin in rural North Carolina. When the family fussed at her for spending so much money on a vacation home, she'd presented Lois and Lucy with copies of the keys, telling them it was a family expense and they were welcome to use the cabin whenever they liked. It made a nice weekend getaway throughout much of the year, but tended to stand empty in the winter. The lofty ceilings were hard to heat, and with a steep, mile-long driveway, it was too easy to get stuck there in a sudden snowstorm.

Clark walked with Lois through downtown Asheville until they found a secluded spot to take off. They soared into the sky, through thick clouds laden with snow, and landed again on the ridge just above the cabin. It looked, as Lois had teased Lana, like something from a Hallmark card: steeply-pitched slate roof, split log siding, and at the moment the entire thing was lightly dusted with snow.

Lois shivered and tucked her gloved hands into her pockets. Snowflakes drifted lazily down, a few of them landing on her midnight hair. Any other night she'd have been thrilled to be in the cabin itself, the property actually her favorite, but now was not the time for this. Talk about your 'fool's errand'. "Oh, look, there's the cabin. Yay, it's still here, let's go home. I'm *freezing*."

"We actually have to go inside, Lois," Clark chided gently, his hand in the middle of her back propelling her down toward the front door, where the caretaker had hung an evergreen wreath.

There was that flash of irritated hazel fire again. "You can see everything from out here, honey."

"Don't you want to get warmed up? Come on, I'll make cocoa." That generally guaranteed Lois' agreement, and although it was grudging, it worked again. Growling her displeasure, Lois let him lead her inside. As soon as they were indoors, Lois quickly turning up the thermostat in the chilly living room while Clark wandered into the huge kitchen to warm some milk and get out the chocolate and marshmallows.

A quick trip around the cabin, and Lois was back. She looked vaguely puzzled when she took the mug of now-ready cocoa from him. "It's kinda weird. Everything looks okay, but the sheets are still on the bed in our room. You figure the caretaker would have stripped them by now. We're not due back until May. Funny, huh?" Clark shrugged at her as she sipped the chocolate gratefully. He saw her eyelids fluttering as relaxation crept up on her. It was about time she got a chance to unwind. "God, I'm tired. Why is it that every time you sit down this time of year, you feel as if you're been running a marathon?"

"Then go take a nap," Clark said with an adoring smile, kissing her hair. "I'll keep an eye on the time, and *we* don't have to worry about getting snowed in."

His wife stood there considering for a moment. They were actually *ahead* of schedule for once and she was still pretty groggy from the insanity of the day. Before Clark had ever sprung the shopping trip on her, she'd had baking to do, gifts to wrap, a final story to finish for the next day's paper. What could it truly hurt? Besides, maybe her mood would improve after. With a murmur of assent, Lois finished the last of her cocoa and made her way to their room to lie down.

Lois was fond of saying that this was one of the most decadent beds she'd ever slept in; while outfitting the cabin, Lana had sprung for the air-filled mattresses that were individually adjustable on both sides. The burgundy comforter was down-filled, and the sheets were exquisitely soft, the room décor full of gorgeous warm tones. She'd been up far too late the previous night, barely snatching four hours of sleep, and Clark soon heard her breathing deepen and slow.

It was a tickling sensation along her side that woke Lois in the end. She opened her eyes to see Kal-El lying on the bed beside her, giving her an amused, adoring look. Blinking drowsily, she gazed up at him, wondering why the room was so dim...

...and then she glanced at the clock. "Shit! Clark, we were supposed to be *home* half an hour ago! Richard's gonna spaz, the kids will give us hell, and you still have to wrap that freakin' truck!"

"No, we weren't, he won't, they won't, and I don't," Kal-El replied, laughing.

"Yeah, you wish, smartass." Lois tried to get up and get moving, but his hand on her belly pinned her to the bed very efficiently. Trying again with the result another failure, those hazel eyes bored into him, hoping he'd get the message and let her go. His pinning her down in bed was usually fairly sexy, but at the moment his show of power just made her want to swat him.

His smile was just a little too pleased with himself for her comfort, too. "Lois, you're usually not this unobservant," he said lazily, and her eyes narrowed in fury. How *dare* he! If it wouldn't break her hand, she'd smack him a good one for being such a smug jerk.

Just as Lois geared up for a verbal assault, her recently-awakened mind finally got up to its usual operating speed, and tallied the coincidences of the day. Kal-El told her they had to go look in on Lana's cabin, which the redhead paid a caretaker to do; the place was decorated

for the holidays; there were fresh sheets on the master bed; and most telling, there was fresh milk in the fridge. All of that said that someone meant for the cabin to be occupied this week, when it was normally vacant all winter.

Lois' eyes narrowed then, realizing just how neatly he had maneuvered her into doing exactly what he wanted yet again. "You ... you sleaze!" the reporter yelled in disbelief, and whapped him as hard as she could with the pillow.

Kal-El chuckling heartily now without even bothering to hide it, fending off the pillow attack easily. It never ceased to amuse him when he could actually get one over on her. "I'm surprised Richard didn't blow it when he insisted that we get back on time, "

Growling, Lois sprang at him, finding his ticklish spots mercilessly. They wrestled, Lois mock-angry and Kal-El laughing, until he pinned her and kissed her nose. "We're here until Christmas Eve, love. Just you and me."

Lois snapped her teeth at him, then lay there and stared up at him with one eyebrow arched skeptically. "Uh-huh, yeah. We're all alone. Just you and me and the cape club," she retorted, rather more sharply than she meant to.

He shook his head slowly, knowing all too well what had brought this on. Especially since that was one of the reasons that they were down here. "No. I'm off duty, for once. That was the whole point of setting up the League, so we can all take the occasional break without sacrificing our duty. Or our peace of mind. And since I'm married with kids, I got the first Christmas off."

The look Lois gave him was doubtful. "Really?"

"Really," he confirmed, adding in a teasing tone, "Unless something world-shaking happens, and in that case, you'll want to report on it anyway."

Lois was growled again, but she couldn't protest; they both knew it was true. Laughing again, Kal-El let her up. "Come on, love. I'm mulling some cider for us, and it's snowing."

Ten minutes later they were wrapped in an afghan, sipping hot cider as they gazed at the snow-capped mountains out the window or the blazing fire in the hearth. Lois reflected that this was how Christmas *should* be: snuggled up with her husband - and coming up on their fifth anniversary, that thought still sent a pleasurable shiver down her spine. "So what exactly are your plans for this little vacation, Kal-El?"

He sighed against her neck, and Lois' eyes drifted closed as he nuzzled her. "Hmmm... It may have been a *little* presumptuous of me, but I booked us both into the Hot Springs spa tomorrow morning..."

As he spoke, the arm around her waist slid upward to the next of her blouse. Deftly unbuttoning the top button, he continued, "They have couples' massage, and I thought you'd enjoy a long soak in the mineral springs too."

A knowing quirk of her lip and Lois shifted slightly to grant him easier access. "Mmmm. Sounds nice. And then?"

He moved on to the next button while saying, "In the afternoon, I thought maybe a horse-drawn carriage tour of the Biltmore estate, followed by a tasting at the Biltmore winery. They have a very nice café as well."

Hazel eyes slipped momentarily closed when he slid his hand down further, increasing the pressure of his kisses just a bit. She had to fight from gasping her response. His methods of seducing her were down-right admirable after all this time. Nevertheless, a purr of appreciation flavored her words when she spoke. "And after that?"

"Head back here and snuggle in for the night," her husband mused. She felt him smile

against her neck and added, "Maybe we'll have our own private tasting."

A wicked grin curved Lois' lips at that. He knew exactly what to say to drive her mad these days; how to phrase things so that they were very salaciously without ever being crude. The reporter's murmur against his hair was faintly disappointed. "Mmm, we might have to reschedule that one."

When she felt him hesitate in surprise, she turned to face him with her lips still curled in that smile, letting him see the heat in her eyes. "How about tonight?"

His answer was a deep, lingering kiss, and within moments neither of them was paying any attention to the picturesque snowscape outside.