

Snapshots - All I Want For Christmas

by Kala Lane Kent

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Rating: T

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The winter weather had crept indoors, drafts skirting Lois' ankles as she walked quickly to the meeting room set aside for the *Daily Planet* Christmas party. She held the neck of her trench coat closed, knowing it would be warmer at the party itself. So many people in one space, the heat cranked up high, and best of all, the room insulated from the outdoors by several corridors. Beside, the punch was always spiked, and a little liquor would chase away the chill.

The reporter smiled fondly at that memory; employed at the *Planet* less than a year, and underage to boot, she'd 'borrowed' a bottle of Perry's own rum and added it to the punchbowl when no one was looking. All would have been well if one or two others hadn't had the same idea ... and if the rum Lois had taken hadn't been Bacardi 151, liquor so potent it came with a flammability warning. Everyone who sampled *that* punchbowl had wound up diluting it with the other punch, or turning it down all together. Good times.

Lois opened the door to an archetypal scene of festivity, light and warmth and music overlaid with a babble of conversation. Multicolored lights twinkled, ornaments shone, and everyone had dressed in their party best. She was fashionably late - hardly surprising, considering that her favorite story had dropped by earlier in the evening - and everyone turned to look at her when she arrived, which was exactly how Lois wanted it.

What they all saw was a petite reporter, her raven hair lying wavy over her shoulders, the long coat covering her from chin to ankles. Chuckles greeted her appearance, more than a few glancing at the clock pointedly, and Bill Freizon teased, "A trench coat? Some party dress, Lane! You going to wear a sack next time? Considering all the attention you've been getting lately, you think you'd try harder."

Lois smirked wickedly, shrugging the coat off her shoulders and tossing it onto someone's chair. *Then* the wolf whistles started. The dress was a deep, vivid crimson, and it followed every curve like a reporter on a hot story. It left her shoulders bare, and Lois had decided not to flat-iron her hair that morning, so the raven locks curled in sharp contrast against her pale skin. The top didn't bare too much cleavage - not like some of the party dresses she saw around her, only a gasp or a stumble away from flashing the entire room - and the length of it fell to her ankles, but all the way down to her knees it clung to her body, perfectly accentuating her long legs.

Jimmy Olsen's eyes went wide, and Bill laughed out loud, applauding with a grin. "Nevermind! I stand corrected!" Even Gil Truman turned around for a better look while Judy was preoccupied. Lois just rolled her eyes, not even trying to hide the impish grin as she

sauntered over to the refreshments, though those keen hazel eyes were looking up warily as she did. This was no time to wander beneath a parasitic weed...

Sure enough, someone had hung mistletoe from the ceiling in several spots. Lois saw the first one almost too late, and shied away from it with an evil glare. It was worth the narrow escape, however, to hear Lombard sigh in frustration. "Get that thought out of your head, Grizzly," Lois warned over her shoulder, the look she shot him almost black. "Not a chance in hell. You'd have a better shot with one of the interns. If you even try, I'll break your *other* hand."

He sulked away, much to her relief, then Lois heard a much friendlier voice at her elbow. "I think I captured that one for posterity," Jimmy said, grinning when she favored him with a smile. "You look really great, Miss Lane."

"Why thank you, Jimmy," Lois said. All dressed up in a nice suit, Jimmy Olsen was trying his hardest to look as grown-up as possible, but that grin was just like a kid's on Christmas Day. A mischievous impulse struck her, and she leaned in to kiss his cheek briefly. As Jimmy turned the same red as her dress, Lois only smiled wickedly and said, "Merry Christmas."

There was the general laughter from their audience, mostly because Jimmy was trying not to act as though the kiss affected him. "Aww, sure, kiss the kid. He can't fight back." Bill was back at it, watching the show with his usual amusement, as the entire room groaned. "That just figures. Dammit, Lane. You're *trying* to stay off Santa's nice list this year, aren't you?"

That earned him an honest laugh from the woman in question. Her grin was positively trouble when she cocked up that left eyebrow and put one hand on her hip. "I will have you know I'm the whole reason Santa *has* a naughty list," Lois proclaimed, eyes sparkling with mirth. "Besides, being this naughty is gift enough unto itself."

"Amen to that," Alice Pappas muttered, sharing an amused look with Loueen Willoughby, who had just strolled up, dressed to the nines. "Hey, Jimmy? You okay? Ya breathin'?"

The kid seemed to be just getting himself back into sorts when the question was asked. "I'm fine; I just..." Jimmy muttered, the blush returning in force as he tried not to let the embarrassment show. He started to look up, saw Lois out of the corner of his eye, then couldn't look up again. "...sheesh."

Lois felt someone's hand clasp her shoulder and shake it affectionately. "You, Lane, are an evil sadist," Perry said as she looked at him drolly. "Everything under fifty drooling over you, and you smooch the photographer. Very nice. Don't worry, Olsen, you'll live."

Leave it to the old man to ruin a beautiful moment, not to mention side with the boys to boot. Turning around to face him with an annoyed expression, she crossed her arms and looked him straight in the eyes. "Well, we all know I'm making a habit of spending time with *nice* guys these days, Mr. White," Lois said archly.

"Yeah, ever since you broke up with the damn..."

Several of her closer companions winced. Unsurprisingly, that comment earned the editor a vicious glare, the black-haired woman's jaw tightening noticeably. Everyone at the *Planet* knew all too well just how Lois felt about her last companion. Perry, most especially. "Don't you dare even *say* it."

None of those present missed the little smile that flitted over the older man's lips, easily acknowledging that fact that he was riling her up on purpose. "Broke up with *Dr. Marrin*," Perry amended wryly, "six months ago."

And, of course, once the Chief had turned the tide, all the other guys thought it was safe to start in on her. Several members of the group grinned as the free-for-all flag was waved.

"Hey, remind me, Lois? He only backed off, what, two months ago?" Bill added, leaning back in his chair with a sly smile.

Almost as soon as those words were out, Gil seemed to catch his drift and chimed in, "And ever since we've only heard your name connected to..."

Just watching the devilish amusement of the men of the group, Lois was reminded of why she was glad she and Lucy had never had brothers. These guys were bad enough, more than willing to hamstring you with the things they knew annoyed you. "Oh, just shut up," Lois snapped petulantly, now turning on the older men. It only aggravated her more knowing that she'd only seen the superhero a few hours ago, and the delight of that meeting still warmed her heart. "That's just so typical of you hounds. I don't know *what* you're trying to imply..."

The defensive tone of her voice and the exasperated look in her eyes were just fuel for the fire. Exchanging a look, the two men seemed like nothing so much as a pair of mischievous little boys knowingly taunting their sister. "Mile-high club," Bill interjected, chuckling.

"Oh my God, Bill, are you *trying* to get killed?" Loueen groaned, dropping her head onto Alice's shoulder with a sigh. The blonde secretary just patted her head and rolled her eyes at the boys' games. It never failed; ever since Superman had first appeared, and Lois had been so protective of her obviously 'favorite' story, all of the guys in the newsroom had never let her hear the end of it. And Lois had been fighting it from then on.

As fiery as she had been when she came in, those eyes were full of frost as she stared down both snickering men, her expression making it clear that she considered them something slimy beneath her shoe. "Reality check, boys. Doesn't matter how he looks, we all know I don't get involved with my stories, regardless of what you'd like to think. Do we need to recite the Lane Reporting Code of Honor again?"

"Exactly, Freizon," Perry said gruffly. "It's a good thing I know you weren't suggesting that Lane gets more than exclusives from our resident superhero. Sure, it's fun to tease the star reporter, but I don't allow slander in this office. And besides, you'd do better to try out-writing her than outwitting her. At least *you* can spell."

"Chief!" Lois yelled, and at that moniker Perry gave her a look as scolding as the one she gave him.

Someone had to intervene, and Clark did so by arriving at Lois' side. "Um, hello, Lois," he said, with his usual hesitant murmur. "That's a very nice dress."

The sound of his voice was coming from slightly behind her and she turned swiftly toward it, startled, raven hair flying. From the look on his face, Clark clearly expected her to snap at him for unnerving her, but to the surprise of those present, Lois just smiled warmly. Not the teasing, come-hither grin she'd shown to everyone else in the office, but a true smile of open affection.

"Hello, Clark," Lois said fondly, and watched as he broke into a delighted smile of his own. His feelings for her were utterly obvious, but so was the fact that he was too intimidated to act on them. With anyone else, Lois would've cut them dead, but she indulged Clark. It didn't help that Perry had been sending them out on stories together a lot lately. The editor claimed it was because Clark was the only man in the office, other than himself and Jimmy, who could be trusted to keep his hands off Lois, his various body parts unbroken, and his mind on work when they shared a hotel suite, but Lois suspected that Perry's motives had more to do with her and Clark's innate competitiveness. The editor was always certain of getting a great story, and getting it far sooner than any other paper, if Lane and Kent were both scrambling to get their byline beneath it.

For a moment, though, Clark was just looking at her with such honest affection that she had to laugh. But the laughter was kind. Lois knew his feelings all too well and, coming on the heels of her moment of happiness with a certain hero earlier in the day, she couldn't deny him his own. They had grown a lot closer in the last year and more than once she had realized that he was the best male friend she had. Hell, probably even her best friend. And on a night like this, what were friends for? Well, in this case, letting you know that you're wanted. Beaming at him with mischief gleaming in those hazel eyes, Lois couldn't resist teasing him, "You can breathe, Clark. It's okay, I promise. I'm not going to disappear or anything."

Raising an eyebrow to look him over, her eyes took in that this year's Christmas suit was better than last years. Gray suit, white button-up, and a God-help-us Christmas tie. Green. With reindeer. Her grin never budged a bit, but on the inside she was trying not to groan and drop her head in her hands. Some things would never change, no matter how much she poked and prodded him. Then, knowing it would make his night, she commented, "Not too bad, Mr. Kent. Not too bad. Cute tie." She knew better, knew she'd hate herself for saying it when she saw it next year and the year after, but the smile she saw start was enough to make up for the exasperation later.

"Thanks," Clark said, brushing at the tie self-consciously, and pretending not to see Bill and Gil rolling their eyes hopelessly. It was much more difficult to look away from her; she was positively radiant tonight, and the spellbound look he'd been giving her wasn't entirely part of his act. Such a difference from earlier this evening...

...earlier Kal-El had been surprised to catch the intrepid reporter in the act of baking cookies. The balcony doors had been open, and he had waited on the parapet for several moments for her to come out before calling her. He was too much the gentleman to land on her terrace without being invited, or to use his x-ray vision to peer inside her windows like a voyeur. An entirely different side of Lois Lane emerged, the lady herself obviously startled by the summons, rushing out onto the balcony with embarrassment and amazement in her hazel eyes, flour on her hands and the air around her fragrant with nutmeg and cinnamon.

He'd been amused; he couldn't help it. Kal-El was more accustomed to catching the scent of expensive and warm-scented perfumes and soaps on her skin, or sometimes a hint of cordite if she'd been down at the firing range. Cozy, homey aromas like that just didn't seem her style ... and Lois had blushed fiercely then, realizing she had simply run out the door without thinking of how her guest would see her. Kal-El had greeted her gently, complimenting her cooking, to which she'd replied in the vaguely defensive tone that her mother demanded cookies for this year's Christmas gathering instead of the usual bourbon cheesecake. The mere thought that he had caught her at something even slightly domestic seemed to horrify her.

That charming moment had ill prepared him for this one. Now Lois was sultry and stunning, and she knew it to the core of her being. Clark was almost glad when the other men started in on teasing her again and took her attention off him.

Clark hovered around the edges of the party, watching his friends and coworkers celebrate. Everyone seemed to be in the holiday spirit this year, even Mr. White - although the current circulation numbers for the paper were probably part of that. Lois was currently drinking a glass of mulled wine with a candy cane in it, and using that prop to win an argument. She, Bill, and Gil were discussing the top stories of the past year and arguing good-naturedly over which of them had more headlines. Only Lois kept derailing the conversation by absently nibbling on the candy cane.

Smiling at that, even though the sight gave *him* pause as well, Clark headed for the punchbowl. Ron Troupe was there, talking to Jimmy, and both men grinned at Clark. "Be careful, Mr. Kent," Jimmy warned cheerfully. "I think somebody spiked the punch."

"A grand *Planet* tradition," Ron added. "C'mere, Clark, I need to talk to you."

"What is it?" Clark asked, getting himself a cup of punch. There was *something* in it, but so watered down he couldn't identify it.

Ron put his arm around Clark's shoulders and whispered, "Look, man. I know you're carrying a torch for Lois, okay?" Jimmy nodded.

Clark, meanwhile, felt his heart plummet. It wasn't as though he hadn't made it obvious; it was all part of the disguise, the inevitable yearning after a woman he could never get in a million years. The problem was, that particular part of the act was in earnest, and he'd been enjoying watching Lois be her usual sarcastic self up until the moment he was reminded of his unrequited love. He couldn't even say anything to Ron, just looked down.

"Now look," Ron said. "You know how she is. You see what she's doing right now? Totally messing with Bill and Gil, and Gil better quit before Judy sees him. Notice anything?"

"Um, not really," Clark replied, wondering where this was going.

"What you *should* notice is she's not playing that nonsense with *you*," Ron said. "Clark. The woman cares about you. Hell, she'll tear the head off anybody in this place who says a word about you. Lois might yell at you, but she won't let anyone else do it. She *likes* you, Clark."

Blinking, Clark remembered all the times Lois had gotten protective over him. It was quite endearing, considering how often he wound up saving her... "She's the same way about you and Jimmy, Ron," Clark pointed out.

"And Perry, too," Ron said. "She watches out for me because I married her baby sister. Jimmy..."

"She thinks of me as a little brother," Jimmy said, and downed the rest of his punch.

"Yeah," Ron said, watching the photographer warily. "Clark, here's the deal. If you wanna be her best pal forever, that's fine. But if you want something more, you're gonna have to be a little aggressive. Ask the girl out."

"That's all very well," Clark said, sidestepping the advice. "But you're forgetting that Lois, um, has her heart set on someone else."

"Who, the cape?" Ron scoffed. "Get real. It's not like *he* can take her out to dinner or anything. Besides, she's Lois Lane - she's too good a reporter to let him be anything more than a story."

Little did Ron know the effect of those words. *I'm stuck - I can't be with her as Clark, because she's blinded by Superman, but I can't be with her as Superman, because I can't court her as Superman. The moment we were seen together, the whole world would know she compromised her journalistic ethics. I won't force Lois to be someone she's not. Not to mention, she'll never be safe if she's with me...*

Before he could dwell too much on that, Lucy arrived and gave Clark a hug before pulling her husband away. That left Clark and Jimmy, but as Clark turned toward the younger man, Jimmy lifted his camera. "Oh please, let me get this," he murmured.

Clark turned to see Perry standing directly under the mistletoe. Loueen strolled up, slid her arm through his, and when Perry looked at her, she pointed up. Clark was startled to see Perry look surprised and a trifle embarrassed as Loueen pulled him down for a kiss. Jimmy's flashbulb went off as the entire staff applauded.

"Okay, so maybe *that's* why he's in such a good mood," Clark murmured.

Lois hadn't planned on dancing with anyone tonight, but her brother-in-law caught her hand and pulled her onto the dance floor. This struck her as utterly hilarious, and Lois smiled mischievously as she danced with Ron. Then again, after her fourth glass of spiked punch, it was little surprise that everything amused her.

After the second turn with no visible hesitation from his partner, Ron looked intently into Lois' eyes. "First things first, Lo. Tell me you're taking a cab home."

That statement earned him the rolling of eyes that he had expected. "Of course," Lois laughed. "Ron, come on! You've known me for seven years now. You know perfectly well that I wouldn't have had a drop if I was planning to drive."

Yes, he knew that perfectly well, especially since her car was currently parked in the garage at Reeve Plaza, where it stayed almost constantly unless Lois was on vacation or driving out to see her mother. It also wasn't what he had meant. "I mean you and your penchant for walking the five blocks home regardless of hour or weather."

That was enough to make her smirk at him. "Sometimes I wish you weren't so quick, Ron. Then again, I never would have let you get a second date with my baby sister if you weren't." Snickering and shaking her head, she sighed dramatically. "Yes, Mother, I have cab fare in my jacket pocket. You can stop worrying what to tell the family if I go missing."

"Good girl," he responded with a grin. "I never doubted you once." They danced without speaking for about half the song, although Lois still chuckled a bit. Lucy was currently dancing with Jimmy nearby, giving her husband and her sister a brief wave from across the floor.

Even in her tipsy state, Lois knew that Ron's thoughtful silence meant that he was gearing up to ask her something, and she waited patiently for him to find the words. The music was soothing, Ron had a sense of rhythm, and it was nice to dance with a guy she was sure wouldn't try maneuvering her under the mistletoe.

"Listen, Lois," Ron finally said, and her hazel eyes focused on him. Just his tone told her how serious he was about the topic at hand. "You really do look good tonight. Better than usual, and that's saying something with a Lane girl. We both know that you don't need your brother-in-law to tell you that."

Her sister's husband was not the kind to flatter just because. If Ron said it, he meant it. Grinning at the compliment, she couldn't help but notice the way he'd neatly included Lucy in the praise. "Thanks, Ron."

"And everyone's looking at you. But you know, there's a couple guys here, you're really killing them. Nice guys - I'm not talking about Lombard. That fool..." Ron shook his head. "He hasn't got the sense to know when to quit. The guys I'm thinking of, well, they know you're out of their league, but they can't help it."

Now this topic was turning out to be interesting. "Who are you talking about?" Lois asked curiously, cocking her head at him.

Despite being four years younger than her, Ron Troupe did the most inspiring scolding look of anyone Lois knew. "You ought to know," he rebuked gently. "You damn near gave one of them a heart attack tonight."

Now that description made her guessing a little easier. "Oh, you mean Jimmy," Lois said, smiling at the memory. "He's a sweetheart, Ron, but I've known him since he was fifteen and begging for a job. He reminds me a little of myself at that age. He's also like my kid brother. It's not like that at all..."

"I know that, woman," Ron replied, as the music slid easily into another carol. "The thing is, Jimmy's not the only one. I know someone who's been a good boy all year, and he's probably only got one thing on his Christmas wish list: you. And unlike half of these guys, he's picturing it G-rated."

Even if she hadn't already suspected, Lois would've known who he meant by that description. "Clark," she sighed guilty, eyes sliding closed. Oh yes, there were more than a few times when she'd taken advantage of his chivalry and his puppy-crush to boost her own spirits. Sharing a suite on assignment, deliberately strolling past him in a slip just to watch his expression go utterly blank for three or four seconds before he scolded her for prancing around where anyone could see her. It was practically irresistible at times, especially if the day had been discouraging. She blushed a little at that rather selfish thought, knowing Ron would probably think less of her for deliberately teasing the only man around who would forgive her for it.

"Yeah, Clark," Ron said. "Y'know, Lois, the man loves you. I know that doesn't matter a whole lot if you don't love him back - not the way he loves you, anyway - but the least you could do is be nice to him for a day."

Coming from Ron, who knew her fairly well, it hurt just a bit. Sure, she was tough on Clark on occasion, but never deliberately callous. And Ron was not the first person to have scolded her about it. "Wait just a minute here! I don't know if you realize this, but he's my best freakin' friend." She was more than a little upset while she protested, "What do you think I am to him all the time, vicious and nasty? You people act like I beat him up every day at lunch and take his milk money or something."

"He's got almost a foot of height and a hundred pounds on you, Lois, even if you did beat him up I'd think he'd be more embarrassed than injured," Ron countered. "Besides, I know this about you, but a lot of people don't: the more you like somebody, the more you tease and harass and pester them. You're always picking at him, and he knows it's meant in fun, but damn, he's got to have the patience of a saint not to have ever tried to pull the same nonsense on you."

That made her pause. Lois bit her lip, considering what he was telling her. It wasn't so much that Clark was defenseless before sarcasm; he'd proven a quick wit in certain situations. But he was always kind to Lois, even on the rare occasions when her quick temper lashed out at him. It was as if he somehow knew how easily wounded she was, at the very core of all her hard-won toughness, and he let that knowledge determine how he treated her.

Such thoughts were rather unnerving. After two years with Elliot, Lois tended to distrust anyone who had a keen insight into her personality. But Clark ... it was impossible not to trust him. And if anyone deserved kindness from Lois, who so rarely meted it out, it was him.

Ron, who had watched her expression throughout that entire line of thought, nodded at her slight smile. "Yeah," he said quietly, as if she had spoken. "You do that."

It was very late indeed when Lois found herself sitting beside Clark during a pause in the music. She was very mellow, but not drunk. Lois looked up at Clark through the haze of goodwill that alcohol sometimes cast over her, and saw him looking back at her with the same affection as always. The same respect, too - she'd noticed some of the other guys watching her with a calculating look, wondering just how tipsy she was. Their attempts at subtlety had amused her so much, she'd had to sit down, lounging in a convenient chair and laughing at the absurdity of it all. *A dozen men trying to maneuver me under the mistletoe, a half-dozen more*

trying to scheme their way under my skirt, all of them drooling over this dress, and the one I really want saw me baking cookies while wearing a 'bah humbug' sweater my sister bought me. Priceless.

Clark had wandered up a moment ago, mildly concerned and not at all wondering how to take advantage of her inebriation, and Jimmy had just taken a picture of Lois looking up at him with a warm, lazy smile. The complete rarity of that kind of smiling immediately worried him. "I hope you haven't had one too many, Lois."

What happened next easily testified to her current mood. Instead of growling at him for being a worrywart, the dark-haired woman just gave a husky and relaxed chuckle. "This is my..." *I can count, come on, it's not that high a number...* "my tenth - eleventh? - no, tenth Planet Christmas party," Lois drawled. "I believe I know when to quit by now, Clark, but thank you."

"Are you sure?" he asked solicitously. "You seem a little sleepy. You'll be safe and catch a cab, won't you?"

Knowing full well that he didn't have a car, it was impossible for her not to tease back, "Why, Clark? Are *you* gonna walk me home if I don't?" As he blushed, she rose to her feet steadily and placed her hand in his. "I'm just a little lit, Clark, not completely toasted. Here, I'll prove it to you." Ella Fitzgerald's smoky voice rose from the speakers, and Lois' smile turned wicked. "Let's dance." The look of panic on Clark's face - and the envy on so many others' - was worth the probability of her toes getting crushed.

Clark, meanwhile, didn't have to pretend to be flustered. Amazing how he could handle natural disasters and the worst his criminal enemies dared to do, but this slim woman with the knowing smile could completely discombobulate him. If only she knew how much attention to detail went into moments like this; the last time they'd danced, on assignment, he'd had to step on her toes to maintain his nerdy disguise, but he'd also had to make sure not to actually break her foot. The trials of being a superhero...

That last dance, Lois had been disgruntled, most of her attention fixed on the lobbyist they were following. But this time, she danced with him like she meant it, looking up into his blue eyes with only the slightest mirth. Amused at his discomfiture, but not laughing at him, and Clark took heart from her warm smile.

The song seemed to last forever and pass in an instant, Clark so focused on her slender hand in his, the sweet-spicy scent of her perfume, that he forgot to step on her feet. Lois had never looked more beautiful, never been so close as she was during that dance ... but she was as distant as ever. He knew couldn't jeopardize her safety or his identity, though for a few short minutes Clark let himself think he could. Let himself dream of a future for them, together, an impossible dream but oh so sweet.

Perfection may be attained in the moment, but it never lasts. The song ended, and Lois seemed to realize that she'd been slow-dancing with her colleague, dreamily gazing into eyes that looked so much bluer than usual... A nagging suspicion was trying to form at the back of her brain, but the wine and the late hour prevented her from articulating it.

As the music wound to a close, Lois and Clark realized that most of the other employees were already gathering their things. It was time to leave; Perry was never forgiving of those who overindulged at the party and showed up late the next day. Lois linked her arm companionably through Clark's, letting him walk her out; she was tipsy enough to appreciate the gesture even though she needed no help to keep her balance.

Clark grinned at her for showing him such favor, but halfway to the door he abruptly

stopped and pulled her to the side. Lois nearly stumbled, pulled off-balance, and she glared at him incredulously. "Clark!"

He smiled sheepishly and pointed up as he continued toward the door. Lois craned her head back to see the mistletoe hanging from the ceiling, around which Clark had just detoured. The notion struck her as hilarious, and he had to stop while she leaned against his shoulder and laughed.

She'd been vigilantly avoiding the greenery all night, aware that most of the men in the place would've loved to catch her standing beneath it. And the one man who wanted a kiss more than all the rest combined - incidentally the one man who was gentleman enough to stop at just a kiss - had passed up the perfect opportunity to get it.

That was the perfect example of why she adored Clark so much. Grinning, Lois chuckled, "Okay, Lancelot, c'mere," and impulsively rose on her toes to hug him. Startled, Clark put his arms around her waist, her cheek against his neck reminding him of the way they'd sometimes flown together.

Before he could react, Lois had turned and kissed his cheek. The moment seemed frozen in time, half of the *Planet* staff staring, Clark beginning to blush... and then Jimmy cried out, "Aw, no, I'm out of film!"

Lois dumped her trench coat onto the coat rack and strolled through the apartment, feeling more mellow and content than she had in months. *If I were a cat, I'd sprawl somewhere and purr blissfully*, she thought, chuckling. The combination of alcohol and admiration left her both sleepy and elated, like she could rule the world from a featherbed. Remembering the expressions on everyone's faces when she came in, laughter bubbled up like champagne. Oh, and wouldn't that be an image that would drive the boys mad. Snickering to herself at the thought, she decided to go outside for some fresh air. *Seems like I like I'm too hot to stand myself, even. Now **that's** impressive.*

It was cold out on the balcony, but refreshing, and Lois leaned on the parapet. She'd been overheated at the party, having indulged a little too much, and now she was finally cooling off, her shoulders bare to the wind as her loose hair stirred in the light breeze. Lois closed her eyes for a while, that little pleased smile still on her lips, savoring the warmth of the wine and the cold night and the spark of pride that burned deep in her heart. Truth be told only one thing could make this evening better...

"Good evening, Ms. Lane." *His* voice, very close, and Lois startled back, eyes wide as she spotted her visitor. Superman hovered just an arm's-length away, smiling at her indulgently, and for once Lois didn't snap at him for surprising her.

The reporter blinked in wonder at her thought made real. For a very long moment, she couldn't speak. Could only watch him there before her wordlessly. Earlier this evening, it had been difficult to mask her feelings from him, hiding behind the usual flirty façade of their professional association even as she hoped none of the clinks in her armor showed. But now, with her defenses downed by several glasses of wine and not in her 'armor', it was harder to deny how just his appearance short-circuited her thought-process. And just how dangerously close she was to risking her journalistic integrity and getting involved with her story. But at the moment, none of that mattered. "Are you actually here?" she asked, the now-familiar ache of longing gnawing at her as she tossed a fly-away lock of hair back over her shoulder.

"Yes, I'm here," he said softly, floating a little closer.

Despite what everyone at the office thought, she really wasn't quite as arrogant as it

seemed. And perhaps only the man standing impossibly on the air in front of her realized that. Azure eyes met hazel, their gazes locked in silent communication. Lois felt an impossible urge rising in her, the desire to simply reach out and pull him close, kiss him and let him taste the sweetness of that last candy cane on her lips. Every ounce of journalistic integrity cried out against it, but was swiftly being drowned out by the chorus of deep romanticism that Lois refused to admit to possessing.

Kal-El was just as drawn to her. It would be so easy to drift closer, pretending it was the fault of the wind, and by the starry look in her eyes she would raise her lips to his eagerly. It would be so sweet just to cup her face, like this, and lean in...

Several times now they'd been close to kissing, in the California desert or after a flight. At the party, when he'd spied the mistletoe, he had actually thought of walking under it with her. But then, did he want the first kiss between him - first that she would remember, anyway - to be something done out of obligation and perhaps pity?

No, he'd thought then, and told himself now. The moment hadn't been right and it still wasn't right. The secret still lay between them, and if he kissed her now, she might catch a whiff of her own perfume still clinging to his skin from when she'd kissed Clark's cheek at the party. Not to mention, if he kissed her, he wasn't sure he could fly away afterward... But would it be so bad for her to figure it out, and for him to stay?

While all those thoughts were whirling in his mind, Lois closed her eyes and leaned her cheek into his palm. Just that little gesture, so trusting and so indicative of her feelings, made his heart swell with adoration. How could he possibly pretend not to love her? And loving her, he couldn't take advantage of her momentary vulnerability for his own selfish desires. Kal-El sighed, letting his thumb caress her cheekbone.

For a moment they were a tableau of yearning, and then both drew back slightly. Lois looked up at him, not knowing why he'd pulled away, but feeling the reluctance when his fingertips trailed along her jaw. That was the face of a man who wanted to kiss her as much as she wanted to kiss him. *Why do you keep holding back?* The pleading question rose to her mind, but not to her lips, and Lois could only watch him, afraid of the answer if she'd had the courage to ask.

"Merry Christmas, Lois," he said softly, and her eyes widened. She'd always been Ms. Lane to him, always that little bit of professional detachment...

"Merry Christmas," Lois said in return, her mouth curving up in a smile. Her smile was warm and full of hope. Kal-El drifted slowly backward, his eyes fixed on her, and she thought to herself that perhaps one day she would no longer have to watch him fly away...