

# Me, Myself, and You

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Four scenes from four different years in Clark's life reflect the changes in how he views Superman, himself, and Lois Lane.

Disclaimer: Portions of dialogue and plot points are taken from "The Witness," written by Bradley Moore; "Whine, Whine, Whine," written by Kathy McCormick & John McNamara; "Oedipus Wrecks," written by David Simkins; and "I've Got You Under My Skin," written by Tim Minear. No copyright infringement is intended.

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January 1994

You smile at me.

It's rapture.

It's torture.

Because, you see, you're not really smiling at *me*. You already kicked me out of your apartment and told me in no uncertain terms that you didn't need me. You can take care of yourself, you claimed. You don't need me hanging around, cramping your style, and making you feel like you're not good enough.

And yet the minute the other me shows up, you're all smiles and nods and invitations.

It hurts.

But it's not your fault.

It's my lie. My deception.

I wish I could tell you. I know that if I were to look at you and reveal to you right this second who I really am, it wouldn't feel like that to you, but it's true. More than almost anything else in this world, I want to tell you my real name.

It's not 'Superman.'

It's 'Clark.'

And I'm in love with you.

How can you not see it? How can you look at me in whatever suit I'm wearing and not be able to tell that I love you more than life itself? That I would do anything to win your approval? That I would get down on bended knee and beg you to look at *me* the way you're looking at Superman?

I've resigned myself to a lot of things since my powers started developing years ago. I've resigned myself to the fact that I will never know my real parents or my native people. I've resigned myself to the fact that I will never be able to wholly fit in with the people I protect and to the fact that I will never be able to hide away all my differences if it means that others suffer. And I've resigned myself to the fact that if I were to show people both sides of me at the same time, they would either reject me or worship me because of what I can do — and I'm not sure which one would be worse.

But there is one thing that I've never resigned myself to; I have never accepted the possibility that there would not be

one woman in the entire world who could love me — not for what I can do — but for who I am.

Maybe it's a fantasy, the same kind that puts stars into your eyes, a giggle into your voice, and awe into your manner whenever Superman shows up. Maybe it's an impossible dream that will never come true. But I want it, Lois. I want it more than anything else, more even than I want to tell you who I really am.

"Errands," you repeat incredulously. "That's funny. I never think of Superman having to run errands."

Of course not. Superman doesn't have to run errands — but I do.

"Well, I do have a life, you know," I say. Playing with fire; it's the only explanation for my reckless behavior. Sometimes I think I'm daring you to see who I really am. I've never slipped up so many times before. I'm always careful, always cautious, always methodical. And yet I've lost count of the times I've used my powers around you, or said something that practically admitted my secret, or showed you something that could so easily lead you to the right conclusion.

But you never see it.

And I'm glad.

And disappointed.

Sometimes, I think I really am two different people trapped in one body. Either that, or I'm slowly going insane.

"Really?" Your eyes light up, so bright they rival the stars for light and dwarf them for beauty. "What kind of life?"

A life that revolves around you. A life I can't imagine anymore without you in it. A life filled with menial tasks like researching every article and investigating crime. A life as mundane and normal as everyone else in terms of getting up for work and brushing my teeth and paying my bills and replying to Christmas cards. And that's why I can't tell you. Because superheroes shouldn't have to do any of those things. And they certainly don't lie.

"Well..." My mind races in an effort to dig myself out of the hole I just put myself in. It's a cycle I go through every time I — as Superman — see you. "Tonight, a neighborhood Watch meeting; tomorrow, a prison."

Your laugh cuts through my soul because it's a self-conscious laugh. When have you ever felt self-conscious around Clark? Well, besides after the pheromone wore off; that incident doesn't count.

"That's cute," you shyly say. "I guess..."

But I don't dare get any more personal or let you make any confessions or declarations we'll both regret when I finally tell you my secret. So I interrupt you. You think I don't see your flash of disappointment, but I do. I see everything about you, Lois, so much that I can't help but love you even though it's more painful than anything else I've ever encountered, even that strange green rock Trask had.

"Well, I'd better be going. You'll be okay?"

The question is a test, you see. If Clark asked you that, you'd snap that you were fine and insist you didn't need anyone to protect you. And if ever you pass this kind of test — the one I find myself giving you more and more often —

then I'll know that I can safely tell you who I really am.

"Uh, sure, I'll be fine."

Disappointment floods my mind, and I rock back a step and then have to cover for my slip. I pick up the paper on your table. "You know, you'd better be careful. If the killer reads between the lines of your story and realizes that you were there —"

"You read my work?" you ask, dizzy elation pitching your voice higher than normal. At least you interrupted Superman; that's something.

Of course I read your work, I want to say. In fact, most of the time I help you write it. But it's different when it's Superman reading the words you put down on paper. And that, too, hurts.

"Always," I reply carefully. These half-truths are just as painful as real lies, but they allow me to pretend that I'm not lying. To pretend that I deserve you in either guise.

Superman had seemed like the perfect solution to my conflicting desires for a normal life and a chance to help. I wonder now...if I had known when I first put on the Suit how much it would hurt to have you fall in love with a disguise that is nothing more than my abilities and a stern expression, would I still have put it on? Would I have split myself into two people in your eyes if I had known then that you would never look at Clark Kent the way you look at Superman?

I don't know. I really don't. And that scares me.

When I turn to leave, you're instantly moving, ready to offer the slightest assistance with no sign of your usual willingness to let me fetch your coffee or your fax or anything else you have a passing fancy for. "Oh, let me get this," you offer, wide-eyed and blushing, your hands full of white curtains.

This isn't the Lois I know; it isn't the Lois I work with every day and tease and walk home. This is a different Lois, a Lois I don't know. A Lois who wouldn't dare refuse me anything or call me names or steal my story. How can one person have so many contradictory thoughts? I want you to look at Clark with that starry-eyed gaze of admiration, and yet I want you to feel comfortable enough with Superman to call me a hack from Nowheresville. How can I expect you to understand my logic if even I don't?

Regardless, I can't watch you swoon over Superman, not when I had only come in because I thought I heard you say my name — my real name. I can't bite back more of my hurt and jealousy and self-condemnation, not tonight, not so soon after almost seeing you die. A second later, and that truck would have hit you. A second later, and those bullets would have torn through your flesh like paper. A second later, and my life would be empty.

With a slight smile that I use to disguise my uneasiness over your adoring manner, I walk to the door. I never know how to respond to your awe and admiration. It's nice to be admired — particularly for the alien side of me that I've often feared no one besides my parents would be able to accept — but I hate being treated like a god. I model my Superman-self after what you think of him, Lois, but I don't want you to treat me like Superman.

Will watching me walk out of the same door you

wouldn't even let me pass an hour ago finally make you realize who I am?

No. Instead, you're still smiling at me, your cheeks flushed and your smile free of any hints of condescension or disdain for country habits.

"Lock your doors — and windows," I command.

"I promise," you gush.

I hate Superman. I hate him because he's perfect. I hate him because he's everything I'm not. I hate him because you adore him. I don't want admiration, Lois. I want love. I don't want obedience. I want partnership. I don't want unquestioning acceptance. I want teasing fun and comfortable companionship.

I hate Superman because he has everything I don't, and yet it means nothing to him. Where can those radiant smiles of yours take us when this Suit stands in the way and Kryptonite is out there? Where can we go on a date when every reporter in the world would follow us with questions and cameras and insinuations?

I hate Superman because he's your hero — and I can't ruin that for you. After everyone in your life who has disappointed you and let you down, you've finally found one man who is everything you were convinced didn't exist in real life. And if you ever find out that Superman is nothing more than a flashy Suit covering your reporting partner, that hero would disappear forever. One more person would have let you down, and I don't think you would ever again let yourself believe in happy endings.

I hate Superman because he's my trap, my curse, my catch 22.

Unbelievable, I think as the door closes behind me. You actually lock your door. You never do what I tell you when there are glasses perched atop my nose. But then, I forgot. There weren't any glasses between us when I gave you that command.

My mind is filled with you as I finish my errands. I'd love to tell you about them in detail, share amusing anecdotes about the strange people I meet at Watch meetings, hold you when I feel like I can't face one more criminal's unwavering hatred. You would know about that, Lois; you would be able to comfort me and probably share your own anecdotes and horror stories.

But that day is far away. Superman can't be vulnerable. He can't be hurt. He can't be tired. He can't be jealous.

But Clark can. And in the end, that's who I am, no matter how much I occasionally wish differently.

It's a good thing I don't notice the cold because the night is so chilly the park bench I choose as my post has ice frosted over its surface. Even if I felt the cold, though, I don't think I'd mind. My fingers run over your article, touching your words with the caresses I'd rather give your smooth skin. You've made yourself a target, something you do with frightening regularity, something I'm trying to get used to. But as much as I've had to resign myself to throughout my life, I've never been able to do it regarding you. If I could, I would have given up a while ago and told you Superman is really Clark Kent.

The paper crumples in my lap as I close my eyes and let myself sink into my familiar fantasy. How will I tell you?

Will it be blurted out as soon as you tell me you love me — the Clark me?

Will it be during a candlelight dinner after talk of marriage?

Will it be in the darkness of a cell just before I break through the wall to release us?

My smile fades as the fantasy devolves into images of your reaction.

Will you shout at me and condemn me for lying even though I say I stand for truth?

Will you scold me with a laugh and say you knew all along, you were only teasing until I got up the courage to tell you?

Will you stare at me with those big, dark eyes full of tears and turn away without speaking?

Noticing the crumpled paper in my hands, I carefully smooth it out. My thumb lands on your byline, sitting so prominently atop your article, and I can't help but whisper your name.

Sometimes, when I see you go off for another date with Luthor, I ask myself why I'm so intent on waiting for you. Sometimes, when you scorn me and smirk in that infuriatingly cute way, I ask myself why it's you I dream about. Sometimes, when your dismissal of Clark and your idolization of Superman hurts the most, I ask myself why I love you alone out of all the women in the world.

But you know what, Lois? No matter how I pretend falling for you was done so fast I didn't have a chance to catch myself, I know deep down that I *chose* to love you. I saw you giving your life away in favor of uncovering the crimes of Metropolis and providing a better tomorrow, and I sensed someone who cares as much about injustice and cruelty as I do. I heard you denouncing the terrible acts that steal lives and hope and saw your tears as you confided in me about how your heart had been broken. I felt your spirit shining through every one of your actions and your loneliness when you went home alone every night. And I looked at you — the woman that embodies all of that and a million more facets — and I *decided* to love you. Attraction can be ignored or denied or squashed, but I let mine for you grow and flower and put down such deep roots that now I don't think I could uproot it even if I wanted to

And I don't want to. I *want* to love you — for your spirit, your compassion, your dedication, your fire, your utter intolerance of anything that contradicts your ideal of the way the world should be, your vulnerabilities, your insecurities, even your complete and total acceptance of Superman — for your beauty, the inner outshining even the outer.

I love you, Lois, and I think I'll love you more with every passing day.

That's why I'll wait. That's why I'll let you send Clark away and gush over Superman. That's why I'll fetch whatever you want me to fetch and live up to whatever ideal you set for Metropolis's superhero. That's why I'll sit out on this park bench all night and watch your dark window and listen to the sounds of your even breathing as you sleep.

When morning casts its strengthening beams over the city, I stand and stretch before moving to sit on your front

steps. I haven't yet decided what my story will be when you come outside, if you even ask. You know me better than you might think considering how large a secret I keep from you, and you'll probably guess right away that I've stayed here all night. Will you be angry that I didn't listen to you, exasperated with my stubbornness, or touched that I care? Whichever, I can't wait to see your face. Just like every morning, I'm impatient to be with you again. Life just doesn't seem as warm or bright or exciting when you're not there.

I look up from the paper I've read a dozen times already when a man comes down the steps complaining about prices and repairs. He sounds like my dad when he has to buy new parts for the tractor, and I can't help smiling a bit as I look back down at your article, which I have memorized by now.

Suddenly, I think I hear you gasp. My head shoots up, and I freeze, listening intently. Your heart-rate skyrockets, and I find myself on my feet with no more than a spare hope that I didn't move at superspeed in full view of the crowded street.

My own heart-rate explodes when I hear you cry out. I drop the paper and run to the building door. The landlord will have more to complain about when he sees what I leave of the lock, but your breath is choking and harsh.

What if I'm not fast enough? What if I'm already too late?

Your unlocked door opens easily. My heart stops when I see you helpless in the arms of a man twin to the one I just saw walk away with his hands full of pipe.

"Let go!" I hold out a hand toward the man, as if I'll suddenly develop the power of telekinesis. "Let her go *now!*"

Something in my voice must alert the assassin of my reckless desperation. I gasp when your body tumbles to the floor and remains motionless. I can't see anything except your limp form, barely realizing that the assassin is rushing from your apartment.

"Okay, okay," I'm murmuring, but I don't know why. Because you are okay — I shouldn't have to say it. You have to be okay. I was guarding you...so I can't be too late now. I love you...so you can't be dead.

Your body is limp and slight as I gather you into my arms. You're not breathing.

Lois!

Gently, I lay my hand on the soft curve of your cheek and place my lips over yours. This is no tender kiss, however...because I'm not ready to give you up. Just as you breathe life into my existence by simple virtue of your presence, I now breathe life into your body.

The choking breath you take restores feeling and thought back to me.

"Clark?" you murmur, and the sound of it would send me to my knees if I wasn't already there, supporting your slight weight. "Clark!"

"It's all right," I assure you, and since you're breathing, it is. "It's all right."

Your voice is weak and thready, your manner almost childlike as you look toward the door. "I couldn't breathe. That nice Mr. Tracewski — "

“No, no!” I interrupt, unable to bear seeing the pain of betrayal in your eyes. I can never bear to see you hurt — another reason I can’t tell you my secret. “No, it wasn’t him. It must have been somebody else. I saw the real Mr. Tracewski leave.”

“He tried to kill me.” Your eyes seek mine, and you silently beg for understanding. How can I explain how anyone could want you dead when I can’t comprehend it myself? Regardless, at this moment, you need me — Superman or Clark, it doesn’t matter. You need a hero, and I have to be it. I *want* to be it.

“I’ll find him,” I promise, already moving to stand and leave you, though everything within me protests the action.

“No!” Your hands clutching at my coat might as well be caresses for the amount of joy and protectiveness they birth within me. “Please don’t leave me.”

I can’t look away from you. Had I seriously ever wondered why I loved you? How could I have been so blind? How could I have ever thought — even for an instant — that you weren’t worth my patience? How could I ever deny you anything, even the perfect, unsullied superhero?

“Okay, I won’t,” I vow solemnly, swearing myself eternally to you. “I’m here. I’m right here,” I say for Clark. “I’m right here,” I say again for Superman.

Both halves of myself, united as one...for you, Lois. Because you are the other half of the whole me. And I’ll wait until you realize that. I’ll wait forever, and I’ll never let go of you.

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May 1995

You look at me.

I straighten.

I shrink away.

Your eyes are filled with triumph and your trust in me.

Trust I don’t deserve.

Oh, Lois, I never meant to hurt you. All my grand dreams and bold fantasies about telling you now seem to be the unattainable, unrealistic wishes of a child. I do want to tell you — that hasn’t changed. What *has* changed is my prediction of the outcome. What’s changed is that I love you more than I even knew was possible months or years or even days ago. What’s changed is that I can’t bear to lose you.

And yet...I am. I’m losing you a little bit more every day.

For a few brief, infinitely precious weeks, you looked at me — at Clark — with all the starry-eyed admiration you used to reserve exclusively for Superman. You smiled at me with all the warmth and care I had waited so long to receive. And then, gradually — yet so abruptly it left my head spinning and my heart in pieces — that love turned to anger and the anger to hate.

But I’m not Clark right now, I remind myself; I’m Superman. That’s why your eyes are soft and open and there’s a bit of a smile playing along the lips I once had the privilege of kissing freely.

“Congratulations,” you tell me with a voice as welcoming and comforting as home. When you put your hands on my arms and lean upward, I can’t help but bend to let you kiss my cheek, a caress of molten sun. I’d do

whatever you asked of me; I hope you know that. Even though Clark seems to cause you nothing but pain, Superman will always be there for you.

Abruptly, I become aware that you’re studying me intently, that razor-sharp mind of yours working furiously.

Fear engulfs me.

“What?” I blurt out nervously, half-tempted to flee in a blur of crimson and sapphire. I want you to know both of me as all of *me*, yet I know the realization will tear you apart. So, for the millionth time, I silently plead with you not to look beyond my impossibly thin mask.

Your smile makes a graceful appearance before ducking away as quickly as my Clark-self. “Oh, I just think I understand something that I didn’t before — why I don’t really know you. Why no one does.”

But you do know me, Lois, I want to say. You’ve seen me at my worst, and you still took a chance on me. You’ve seen me in all my different forms and moods and personas, and you still smiled at me. We’ve worked together, lived together...loved together. And yet that closeness has melted away like steel before my heat-vision, seared to nothing by Mayson’s death, your insecurities, and Scardino’s arrival. And my lie...the lie I can’t bring myself to admit. Because if I tell you the truth, you’ll hate me even more than you do now. You’ll not only hate Clark, but Superman as well. And I don’t think I’d survive without even a fraction of your approbation.

“You live above us,” you continue, oblivious to my tortured, schizophrenic thoughts. “And when we try and bring you down here, we just end up showing the worst side of ourselves.”

I want to scream my denial and shout my protest, but it won’t do any good. I’ve worked hard to make people believe Superman lives differently than humans; to correct that misunderstanding would mean telling the truth. And how can I do that while you hate Clark? While you hate *me*?

When you pause and look down shyly, I have to tighten my arms across my chest to keep from reaching out and pulling you close to me. But that’s something neither Clark nor Superman would dare do. Superman because he cannot endanger you; Clark because he’s lost the right.

“I tried to love you,” you admit, and I pray that’s not regret I hear in your voice. “I realize that that was selfish — because you’re not just here for me. You’re here for all of us.” Your self-conscious laugh and the valiant way you hold back your tears rips through me as if I were vulnerable. And I am, Lois; I am utterly weak and frail and breakable. And right now, I’m shattering.

You meet my gaze with that determination that so often leaves me agape with awe. “I’ll, um, always need you. And I’ll always be your friend.”

I’m shaking, I realize vaguely. Friend was once a word on which I pinned all my hopes; now it is a trap from which I cannot escape.

“But,” you say more firmly, “there’s someone here who needs me, and I just need to figure out how to get him to see that.”

No!

“Lois, I need — ” I cut my exclamation off before it can

go any further.

I'm hurting you. Every time I talk to you through the lens of my glasses, every time I hear your frustrated, despairing sighs at my quick departures, every time I foolishly, jealously complain about Scardino...every time I'm Clark, I hurt you. That's why I'm giving him up. That's why I'm becoming Superman — all of me. That's why I can't say what every dense molecule in my body is screaming at me to say.

“ — to say to you...” I grapple with my despair and pain and grief, fighting to find something to say beyond the obvious. “Uh...thank you. For being such a great friend.”

And that's it. That's all. It's over.

Friend.

I've just locked myself again into the cage in which I've been trapped for so long. So much thought and planning and courage went into asking you out — into inviting you to see me as more than a brother or a friend — how did it all go so wrong? How could you go from being so close to being unattainable? What did I do wrong?

For so long, the one constant in my life has been my love for you. I knew that all I had to do was win your trust and respect and admiration, and then I would be able to ask you out on a romantic date. Once that enormous hurdle was passed, it would all go so much more smoothly. I love you; you already loved me, at least a little bit. For almost two years, I told myself that everything would eventually work out. Just a little more time, a bit more patience, a few more friend-only words, and one day, you would love me the way I love you.

That's not the way things worked at all, though. And I don't know why. How did we so quickly go from love to confusion to anger? What changed in how you saw me from the night of our kiss to the day you accepted a date with Scardino? What wrong thing did I say or do? How did I lose you?

And if I was so wrong about something so fundamental...what else am I wrong about?

I love you, Lois. And that's why I'm walking away from you. Once, you asked me to stay with you — begged me not to leave you — and I promised I would always be there for you. I vowed that I would be at your side forever.

And I will be.

Clark hurts you. He must go.

Superman saves you. He will stay.

Something is breaking, shattering, ripping, tearing inside of me, and I look down to where my cape swirls around my ankles, half-expecting to see remnants of a Kryptonian heart scattered along the floor like rose-petals at a wedding. There's another upside to being Superman instead of Clark — you won't expect the superhero to attend your wedding to Scardino.

My apartment is empty and cold. My actions are stilted and unreal. Even my parents' pleas and advice and touches can't reach me. I can fly so high above the world that I see the curve of the globe, yet even that does not make me feel as alienated and isolated as I feel now, packing up the rubble of a life that failed.

I despise Clark Kent. I despise him because he can't be

what you want him to be. He tried, Lois, he tried so hard. He did what you asked and went where you directed and said what you needed to hear. But in the end, he's a liar — the one type of person you can't stand at all.

I despise Clark because he's weak and awkward and clumsy. He can never say what I need him to say, never voice all that is within my heart, never let you know exactly how I feel. He says all the wrong things and does all the wrong things — he must...because you need someone else.

I despise Clark because he isn't enough for you. You deserve the world, Lois, all the good and right and best things. And he can't give those to you. All he can give you is pain and disappointment. I've seen it in your eyes — the hurt when he runs, the disillusionment when he lies, the growing apathy when he speaks to you. You don't need anyone else hurting you or causing you problems. You need a friend, someone to be there with a smile and the touch of a hand — not cutting comments and confused hurt — when you meet a whole man that can give you whatever it is you need.

I despise Clark because he can never be an ordinary, undivided man.

I've already made an appointment with Perry in the morning to give him my two weeks' notice. I'm going to beg him to keep it from you so that you won't feel pressured or responsible. In two weeks' time, Clark Kent will move across the sea and fade into obscurity.

Superman, on the other hand, will become more prominent; he'll make rescues all across the globe every day, not just in cases of extreme emergency. But Metropolis will still be his home because that's where you are, Lois. And I promised I would always be there for you. I have to stop thinking of everything I'm losing. I have to forget about how much of myself I'll be destroying in order to permanently wear a cape instead of a tie. I have to ignore the terrible grief in my parents' eyes as they mourn for their son...a person I can no longer be.

*You* are what is important. I want you to smile again. I want to see that happy, shining expression in your eyes. I want to hear you tease me again — or at least say something pleasant and nice to me.

I want *you*, Lois. And I'll take you any way I can. A wife was what I wanted most; a friend is what I'm hoping for now; a partner...well, one out of three is still something.

I almost don't answer your knock. Clark Kent is living out his last days, and I don't want to drag our goodbye out any longer than necessary. However, I still have two weeks to work beside you, so what's the harm in answering the door?

What's the harm? The harm is that the very sight of you freezes the breath in my lungs and pours salt into the open wounds of whatever broke inside of me. The harm is that everything I successfully bottled up as Superman can more easily explode from Clark. The harm is that I love you, and it's so much harder for me to stop Clark from acting on that than Superman. Superman has a cape and tights and boots and the specter of Kryptonite hanging over him to keep him from confessing his love. Clark has only his love for you to keep him from making the same admission.

“Hi,” you say, almost nervously.

Somehow, I return the greeting, though I’m not sure how.

Your gaze has already moved on, passing me so quickly that it’s insulting and painful. Why can’t the sight of me cause the same emotions in you that riot within me whenever I catch sight of you?

“Planning a yard sale?” you ask before throwing up a forestalling hand. “No, wait. That’s a form of distancing. My therapist — I know, I have a therapist, can you believe it? — she says I say things like that so I don’t actually have to deal with anything. It’s all very complicated, and it has to do with some boring childhood trauma. Can I come in?”

Since all of that was said in little more than one breath, I don’t have time to come up with an excuse even if I could have convinced myself of the need for one. “Yeah,” I say simply. Clark has never been eloquent, always tongue-tied, always quiet, always biting back too much lest it betray his secret.

Well, in two weeks, there won’t be a secret to keep anymore. Superman will be...Superman. *I* will be Superman.

And Clark Kent will be gone.

“I told Superman that I just wanted to be friends and that there was someone else,” you say quickly, as if afraid you won’t be able to get the words out. It’s a statement I’ve waited two years to hear. A statement that means nothing now because it’s Scardino you love. What does he have that I don’t? Why do you love him? Why did you choose him when I’ve waited so long for you? What is wrong with me that you can’t love me?

You turn to look at me, but this time, it’s me who has to look away. The sight of you standing in Clark’s apartment is torture.

“And Dan and I — ”

No. I’ll be your friend, but Clark can’t listen to you speak about the man who is better than him. *I* can’t listen to it. Even men of steel have their breaking points, and I’m so far past mine even telescopic vision couldn’t bring it into view.

“Look, Lois,” I say angrily. “If you came here to tell me that you and Dan — ”

“We’re not going to be seeing each other anymore.”

My world crumbles in a shower of sudden hope and fierce longing more acute than it has ever been before. Can I dare to hope? If it’s taken away again, I don’t know that I’ll survive it.

My world is rebuilt with the starry-eyed look in your eyes as you gaze at me. And I can’t help but hope. It’s impossible to ignore the sudden optimism flooding my soul with the ease of long practice.

But you’re not looking at me now. You’re looking around at the wreckage of Clark Kent’s life. Your dark eyes widen with growing comprehension, and I know — I’ve hurt you again.

“Wait a minute.” You turn to take in the full scope of the mountains of cardboard boxes. “This isn’t vacation packing, is it? This is...forever packing.”

All my plans and certainties have evaporated like water in the high, thin parts of the atmosphere where space strains

to take dominance over the sky. Superman...isn’t what you want? Clark...is?

“I was thinking of moving,” I try to explain, a lame attempt that falls flat even to my ears. “But now I’m not so sure.”

Familiar anger clouds your features, and I flinch away. “So, what were you going to do?” you demand. “You were just going to slip out in the middle of the night and not even tell me? Send a postcard from — ”

When your voice dies away, I tentatively look up, afraid of meeting your gaze, afraid of never seeing you again.

Your expression softens, and I’ve never seen you more beautiful than in this instant. I wonder how many times I will think that throughout my lifetime.

“I’m distancing,” you say quietly. “I’m sorry. I...I didn’t expect this — you leaving.”

“Lois.” The name is like honey in my mouth, and I relish it as if it’s a rare delicacy. How many more times will Clark get to say your name? A dozen? A hundred? A thousand? A lifetime’s fill? No. Not if I’m going to keep hurting you. It’s Superman alone...or both of me. Could it be? My breath catches in my throat. Are you ready?

“You and I haven’t exactly been getting along lately,” I admit softly. When I asked you out, I promised we would always be friends. Don’t you see that I’m trying to keep that promise? I am giving up everything so you will have what you most desire. I’m sacrificing Clark so I can be honest in as much as I possibly can.

But honesty entails truthfulness in everything. And isn’t this what I’ve wanted almost since the day I met you? Haven’t I been waiting for just this minute, when you look at me and tell me that you choose Clark over every other man in the world — over even Superman?

The time of my fantasies has — unbelievably — come. It’s time.

“It’s my fault,” I hurriedly add, the words stumbling in my haste to finally get the confession out. “And I should tell you th — ”

“Yeah, it’s your fault.” You pace before me, growing closer with every revolution, your tone so determined that it instantly silences me. “It’s your fault...and it’s my fault. You know, we let ourselves get distracted, and we work too much, and we fight about silly things. And all because we’re trying to hide from each other, and I’m sick of it!”

I can’t move. I can’t breathe. I can hardly think.

Do you know? Have you seen the terror in my eyes? Do you realize now that my greatest fear is losing you? That the boxes surrounding us are only filled because I couldn’t see any other way to make you happy?

You meet my gaze, the ferocity of your glare pinning me in place, the softness of your expression melting every solid bone in my body. “The only reason to hide is because we’re scared.”

I know what I’m afraid of, Lois. But what are you afraid of? Life offers you everything — accolades in your career, suitors by the handful, father and brother figures in Perry and Jimmy. What can you be afraid of when you have so much?

“Of what?” Only when I hear my own whisper do I

realize that I voiced my question.

Your voice is quiet, gentle, soothing. “Of the fact that we’re partners. And best friends. And this.”

Your arms around my neck set me free. Your body next to mine restores me to life. Your mouth finding mine rebuilds all the foundations I thought had disintegrated.

Your kiss is life and happiness and hope and light, all rolled into one. How can I disappear into a life of obscurity overseas when you love me? Superman is your friend — I promised that from the beginning, and I’ll never break that promise. But Clark is so much more...and you’ve given him back to me. You’ve taken all my sacrifices and returned them better than they were before.

Suddenly, you pull away. My hand, threaded through the curtain of your night-dark hair, feels each strand linger and fall away. Please, Lois, I beg silently; please don’t leave me.

The same plea you once made to me.

“Clark,” you whisper, my name music from your lips. “If you’re going to run away from this, tell me now.”

The same plea you’re making again.

My arms tighten around you, memorizing the feel of you, the scent of you, the taste of you.

“I’m not going to run, Lois,” I reaffirm my vow, willing you to believe me, willing you to understand that the lie of Superman does not taint the sincerity of the promises I make you. “I’m ready to take the next step...if you are.”

The tests I posed, the hints I slipped, the years I waited...they don’t matter. All that matters is that you, Lois, love...me. The Clark-me.

You hold me tighter and almost smile as your lips meet mine again. You are my world, Lois, encased in the circle of my arms — *Clark’s* arms. And now I know what heaven feels like...because you gave it to me.

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March 1996

You don’t remember me.

Not Clark.

Not Superman.

Or rather...you remember Clark, your partner. And you remember Superman, your hero. But you don’t remember *me* — the mixture of both those things and so much more. How can you claim to remember Clark if you can’t recall the moment I knelt and proposed or the night when you did the same? How can you claim to remember Superman if you can’t recall the way I trembled with terror the first time I rescued you after you knew my secret?

You don’t remember me.

Even after I risked my entire future by acting as if my intimate knowledge of you trumped science’s rules about amnesia — even after I told you I loved you and kissed you — you didn’t remember. How can you not remember? How could that kiss not have burned through you, reestablishing vital connections and reawakening slumbering memories? How could that kiss have affected only me?

And it *did* affect me, Lois. I hadn’t kissed you in so long, hadn’t held you in my arms, hadn’t been free to voice the words that mean the most to me. Being given that so-brief opportunity to do all three was too much of a temptation. So I took it.

And now you’re leaving me.

I let you leave with Luthor once — watched you drive off with him because I couldn’t think or reason past the terrible, awful pain filling every cell in my body. But I can’t let you leave this time. I know you’ll hate me and blame me for taking you from this man you claim to love...but don’t you see, Lois? You don’t love him, and he’ll never make you happy. He’ll control you just like Luthor tried to do, and he’ll want you to change — he’s already started changing you, though I don’t know how in the world he ever managed to convince you to give up the Daily Planet. Even when you didn’t remember me at all, you still remembered investigating.

You *need* to investigate. You *need* to search out clues and uncover secrets and write stories — it’s what you do. It’s part of who you are. Anyone who tries to take that away from you doesn’t really love you. Though you don’t remember me, I remember you, everything about you, and I know that reporting is half of you, just as Superman is half of me. I would no more ask you to give up the Daily Planet than you would ask me to give up my alter ego’s activities.

But as much as I keep telling myself that you don’t really love Deter — just like you didn’t really love Luthor — just like you didn’t really love Scardino — I know *I’m* not the one who needs to be convinced.

I failed you, Lois. I failed you so badly.

I promised I wouldn’t let anything happen to you at our wedding...yet it did. I promised I would never betray you with another woman...but I kissed your clone. I promised I would protect you from anyone trying to harm you...yet Luthor managed to harm you so much more badly than you know. I promised I would put your needs above my own...but I couldn’t resist kissing you, couldn’t resist telling you that I love you. That I need you.

I can’t fail you again, and that’s why I’m racing toward the sound of your cry for help as quickly as Superman can move. You called me...that has to mean something. Because, complicated or not, Superman does love you just as much as Clark does.

The feel of rocks falling away beneath my feet barely registers as I crash into the basement of Roweena Johnson’s house. How you came to be here is a mystery to me, but it’s immediately apparent that you’re in danger. Deter is as helpful as always in the background; Roweena and a man I don’t know are standing near each other, smoke issuing from the man’s unusual helmet. And you...you’re sitting near the wall, staring into space, unable to see me.

Oh, Lois, I miss having you see me. I don’t want to go back to being two people. I don’t want to be just a friend and partner and hero. I want to be all of those together and more.

*How can I love you?* you asked, and I had no answer. You loved both of me so intensely and so thoroughly — I don’t know why. I just want you to do so again.

The plug seems the easiest option to turning off the electromagnetic field. When I tear it from both the wall and the machine, sparks fly, but the field is successfully erased. Employing a quick burst of superspeed, I use the cord to bind Roweena and her companion together.

“You have a lot of explaining to do,” I tell them forcefully, reminded once again of how much easier it is being just Superman than being Clark or Clark and Superman together. “To the police,” I add, lest they start talking and delay me seeing to you. To be on the safe side, I take what looks to be a remote from the man’s hand and throw it to the side.

Besides a cursory glance to make sure Deter is unharmed, I ignore him, sweeping past him to bend over you. You don’t look to be harmed, not on the outside. On the inside, however...I wish I knew how to heal you. I want *my* Lois back, not this woman who looks at me as if she’s never seen me before.

“Clark?”

The Kryptonite-poisoned dagger of your word knifes through me, but I try to conceal it. “N-no,” I say. I hate lying to you. I hate it even more after those wonderful months when I didn’t have to. “Lois, it’s Superman.”

I hate the distinction. I hate it because it’s a symbol of everything I’ve lost, a mark of just how far we’ve fallen apart. You used to know me more intimately than anyone else, even my parents. You saw every part of me — the investigator, the writer, the hero, the man who wept after rescues gone bad, the alien terrified of his own feelings of isolation. Now...now we’re strangers.

I hate the distinction because it’s one more thing keeping us apart. As if Luthor, clones, and memory loss aren’t enough, now I have to lie all over again. I can’t confide in you, can’t hold you when all the cries for help I can’t answer become overwhelming, can’t ask you to cover for me when I need to make a quick exit.

I hate the distinction because when you saw both of me as one man...I could do the same. I could become one man that took Superman and Clark and combined them into a unified whole. Without you there to bind them together, though, I’m once more split apart, divided, weak.

I hate the distinction because the longer I have to make it, the more it becomes real.

For some reason, you’re smiling at me. No matter that I’m bleeding pain inside, I can’t help but notice once again how beautiful your smile is. I can’t help but fall in love with you all over again, even this strange, different version of you. How could Luthor have ever thought I’d be satisfied with a poor, misguided, ill-fated imitation of you?

Your hand tightens over mine. “No...Clark. I *know*.”

For an instant, I cannot comprehend the full meaning of your claim. I cannot allow hope to grow and fester within me, not if it will once more be revealed as a torturous wound of disappointment.

But...if you *do* remember...Longing fills every particle of my being.

“A-are you sa —” I can’t even finish the question, not with so much riding on the answer.

Your smile is more confident, but your eyes have moved past me. To Deter.

“Hold that thought,” you direct, and then you’re gone.

I knew it. To stop myself from curling up in a ball of anguish, I fold my arms tightly across my chest. I wish I could fly away to avoid the sight of you with Deter yet

again, but I can’t. Something within me makes me turn and watch you approach the man who has stolen everything from me in the name of science, controlling me with his threats to your well-being.

“Doctor?” Something about your stance catches my attention — something beyond the usual, I mean. “I think our time is just about up.”

My arms slip to my sides when you rear back a fist and punch the doctor between the eyes. As satisfying as it would be to watch him fall to the ground, I can’t look away from you as you turn back to me.

You’re looking at me, Lois. You’re seeing me. You recognize me.

“I’m back,” you declare with a grin.

The villains of the week are tied up, Deter is out like a light, the machine is off, and the police are on their way. There’s no reason to stick around any longer, not when the questions I want to ask you should only be asked privately.

So, with a smile and a giddy laugh I can’t quite contain, I walk forward and scoop you into my arms, and then I take to the air. I’m desperate to reconnect with you on every level — I’ve never missed you so much in my life, not even when you were engaged to Luthor or when my Clark-self was dead — so I take you high up in the night sky. The same place I took you after you rejected my wedding proposal and we needed to reconnect and reassure each other that our love hadn’t faded away.

For a moment, I don’t even dare speak, as if the sound of my voice would break the spell that leaves you willingly in my embrace. But I can’t hold the question back any longer. I need to know the answer. “Do you really remember? Everything?”

My Suit is no protection against the delicate way you stroke your hands along my shoulders. “I remember my life before you, when being alone was what I thought I wanted. And I remember my life after you, when I learned loving you was what I *really* wanted.”

Amazing, the way those words can make me feel alive again. And yet...I’m still in the Superman Suit. You said you remembered Superman. You asked if he, too, loved you. You did say Clark’s name, but your memory has been returning so sketchily...could it be possible that you think you’re talking only to the superhero? Have you really remembered that Clark is —

“Oh, Clark, I can’t believe I almost lost you.”

The tension slides from my body, pulled back to the earth by relief and gravity. My eyes slide closed when you lean your forehead against mine, and for a long moment, I can’t move. I simply float there and luxuriate in the sensation of being one, whole man in your arms.

There is, however, one final question that I can’t hold back. One more answer to restore the whole of my world.

“And...” I slowly pull out the engagement ring I haven’t let out of my possession since it was returned to me. “Do you remember this?”

You don’t say anything.

The breath freezes in my lungs.

You slide the ring easily onto your left ring-finger. The emotion so blatantly exposed on your face begins to thaw

out the frozen air within me. “I do,” you whisper with a heart-stopping smile.

The breath melts so quickly that it slips from me in a tiny sigh of relief. Forcibly, I banish the memory those two words stir up — the memory of my wedding with the clone. I had thought that was the happiest day of my life until I forced myself to accept the fact that the woman I had married was an imposter. Less than a day, and bliss turned to horror, a dream to a nightmare.

A nightmare that is banished by the feel of you in my arms and the sound of you saying you love me and the sight of you tilting your head to kiss me.

When I kiss you, the pain and the terror and the awful, awful weeks since you were kidnapped fade and dim. They are wounds that haven’t yet healed, I know, but at least now, they’re beginning to.

The kisses we exchange are slow and sweet and searching. We are looking for and finding one another, reaffirming that we are who we thought and we feel as we did before. Kisses that reintroduce us to one another and dispel the remnants of the strangers we had become to each other.

Your lips lingeringly part from mine, and you lay your head against my chest. I know that I should let you rest. You’re still recovering from the trauma you’ve undergone in the past few weeks; I’m not sure how much it took out of you to have your memories restored in this unconventional way. At that thought, I can’t help but chuckle.

“What is it?” you ask quietly, not lifting your head. I’m glad since I don’t want to stop weaving my fingers through your hair, reassuring myself that this is real.

“I was just thinking that you never do anything the conventional way.”

“Lucky you,” you murmur. “Since you’re not exactly conventional yourself.”

“Are you tired?” I ask carefully. You’re my Lois again, but there is a hint of hesitation in my manner toward you. I hate it, but I can’t change it. I’m so afraid that I’ll lose you again. What if I leave you for the night, and you forget me again? What if you really *haven’t* remembered everything?

“A little,” you admit. “But I don’t feel like sleeping. I don’t want to let go of you.”

The tiny hitch in your next breath alerts me to the fact that you’re crying.

“Lois?” Gently, I tilt your head up so I can see the pearly droplets gleaming against your skin. “What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

Your only response is to shake your head and hold me tighter. I willingly return the intensified embrace, but dread crystallizes in my mind.

“Chocolate,” you murmur against my neck. “Definitely chocolate.”

My brow wrinkles at the cryptic remark before I remember how I had told you chocolate always calms you down. “Yes,” I say, desperate enough to try anything that will stop your crying. “That’s a good idea. The Fudge Castle is still open. We’ll get you some ice cream.”

I relax a bit when you pull back to dazzle me with a wide grin. “Chocolate ice cream?”

“Yes, if that’s what you want.”

“It definitely is.” The words sound like a caress, and your eyes tenderly sweep past every one of my features. I can’t help but kiss you again, my stomach tensing with nervousness until you freely return the kiss.

I land us in an unoccupied alley and regretfully release you, gratified by the matching slowness of your step back. An instant later, Superman has disappeared, leaving Clark standing before you. Immediately, you take my arm and fit yourself against my side in your customary place. As if there’s no difference between the super-powered alien in a flashy Suit and the ordinary-looking man in a wrinkled business suit and tie.

Another piece of my heart is restored, sliding back into place next to the other pieces healed by your returning memory.

We walk together to the Fudge Castle and enter. I feel a momentary flash of panic when you don’t order your usual mountain of ice cream buried by every type of chocolate known to man; instead, you ask for chocolate ice cream with hot fudge, whipped cream, nuts, and bananas. You seem more than happy with your selection, though, so I push down my worry and absentmindedly order the same.

You dive right into the dessert, but I can’t look away from you. The bowl of ice cream in front of me is nothing compared to the sight of you — the real, whole you — sitting next to me.

The clone had looked exactly like you, but she hadn’t acted like you at all. Guilt sears through me as I remember how easily I had thought she was you. No matter that somewhere deep inside me, I knew she wasn’t you, I hadn’t been able to admit it to myself until someone else said it aloud. I kissed her, Lois; I would have done more if she had allowed it. For so long, I’ve been concerned about you — finding you, rescuing you, reawakening your memory — but now that you’re returned to me, I wonder if you can ever forgive me for my betrayal.

“The last time I had ice cream was the night before our wedding,” you say conversationally.

I swallow and am finally able to look away, unable to meet your gaze.

“Oh, Clark.” Your hand on mine destroys what is left of my composure.

“Lois, I’m so, so sorry.” I meet your gaze, silently pleading for the forgiveness I don’t deserve. “I kissed her — but that’s all! I didn’t know she wasn’t you. I should have —”

You bestow a tiny, lingering kiss on my cheek, and all my words dry up. “Clark, I know you would never betray me.”

Your words feel like a slap — worse, since a slap wouldn’t hurt me at all. “But I did,” I whisper. “If she hadn’t gone to sleep, I would have...”

“You thought she was me,” you say matter-of-factly. “I would have been insulted if you hadn’t wanted to do more. But you didn’t push the issue, did you?” Sadness suddenly clouds your beautiful features, and I know that despite your words, it does hurt you.

I take your delicate hands in mine, rubbing my thumb

against the engagement ring. “Lois, I wish I could go back and — ”

“I wasn’t crying because of you.” You withdraw your hands from mine and place them on my face as if to ensure that I don’t look away. “Clark, I’m the one who’s sorry. I’ve been remembering some of the things I said and did while...while I wasn’t myself. And I wish I could go back and redo so many things. I do love you, no matter what Luthor made me say. I do want to marry you. And I know why I love you — there are a million reasons.”

“None of that matters now,” I assure you softly. “Come on. Let’s go somewhere where we can talk a bit more freely.”

Only when we emerge out into the night air do I realize that the only place to go is my apartment — the apartment that was supposed to be *ours*. “Lois,” I say tentatively. “You don’t have your apartment anymore. You’re more than welcome to stay at my place. I’ll sleep on the couch or maybe I can stay at Perry’s if you’re uncomf — ”

You turn to me and slip your arms around my neck. “I don’t want to leave you, Clark. I don’t want to forget you again or make you think that I won’t be there for you. Please, please don’t make me leave you.”

It’s not quite the plea you’ve made before, but it’s so similar that my breath catches in my throat. “I would never leave you,” I vow yet again.

You smile and kiss me. Your strength and beauty amaze me now just as much as — if not more than — the moment I first met you. “I know, Clark. But I want you to know that I would never leave *you* either. And all the reasons for loving you are wrapped up in who you are — partner, friend, hero...husband. *You* are the man I love.”

Before I can caution myself to take things slowly, I have already pulled you into my arms and lowered my mouth to meet yours. Clark...Superman...the name doesn’t matter. What matters is that I love you. And that, no matter how impossible it seems, you love all of me. Despite a failed wedding and amnesia, that simple fact makes everything...perfect.

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May 1997

You kick me in the stomach.

It’s painful.

It’s admirable.

If ever I wondered how you would take a strange man coming after you, I don’t need to wonder any more. This body I’m currently in is weak and sick, and now my side feels as if fire is erupting in sporadic goutts of flame, but I have to admire your courage and resourcefulness. You always take control of a situation — I should know since you took over my life from the instant you entered it.

“Lois, it’s me — Clark! I can prove it!” I call out before you can kick me a third time. My head is still spinning from when you flipped me over your shoulder; I miss my invulnerability. I reach up with a trembling hand and flip the switch that prompts the secret compartment to swing into view, brandishing distinctive blue Suits and red capes.

You stare between the compartment and me. I don’t blame you for your doubt. I’ve tried to avoid looking into

the mirror despite the sickened fascination that assails me whenever I catch a glimpse of this new body I’ve somehow ended up in. The blue eyes that stare back at me from beneath silvery-white hair are strange and so...not me. It’s bad enough having two identities; to add a third is almost too much for even me.

“Honey, it’s me,” I say more softly, willing you to believe me. “Lois, the first time you looked into Clark Kent’s eyes, you said you should have recognized him for the man he was. Look into mine now. If anyone can see past the shell and into my soul, it’s you.” A suicidal streak within me prompts my next teasing words. “Come on, honey — no glasses. It should be a snap for you.”

Silence surrounds us. That in itself is enough to illustrate to me your indecision. Silence isn’t something you accept all too often. That you say nothing now only means you’re thinking furiously. If I were lying, I’d be scared. As it is, I’m still a bit nervous as I watch you kneel beside me, tucking your hair behind an ear.

For two years, I appeared as two men before you. One was tall and impervious and powerful and always there when you needed him. The other was ordinary and vulnerable and fallible and always leaving when you needed him. One wore a cape; the other wore glasses. And for two years, that and the different manner I adopted for each of those personas was enough to convince you — and myself — that I was two separate people.

Now, I’m not wearing a disguise. I’m hidden inside a completely different body, one older, taller, and more human than my true form. How can I expect you to look into my eyes and see that I really, truly am your husband? How can I ask this of you? And yet...I’ve recognized you in every one of your disguises. I can sense when you enter a room, feel when you draw near me, and know when you need me. Is that only because Superman has super-senses...or is it the bond between us?

“Don’t move,” you command.

I obey, not sure I *could* move even if I wanted to. You really did a number on me, Lois, but I don’t mind. As far as you know, I’m a stranger. Again.

Your hand on my cheek startles me. An instant later, I read your intent from your face. A small lump of nervousness gathers in the pit of my stomach. Superman kissed you — Clark kissed you — yet you didn’t distinguish the similarities. How can I convince you that I’m really me through a kiss when these aren’t even the same lips?

But when you bring your mouth over mine, all my doubts and uncertainties vanish. I only know that my wife is kissing me, and strange body or not, I can’t help but respond.

When you draw back, your eyes are wide with shock and realization. “Oh my...Clark, it is you. What happened?”

Joy sets every cell in my body afire with delight and triumph.

You know me.

Without even a single visual hint of my true body, you recognize me and instantly know me as Clark. Your husband. Your lover. Your soul-mate.

I kept the most enormous secret of my life from you

because I wanted you to love me no matter what I wore...and you do.

Clark Kent.

Superman.

A stranger.

I shake my head a fraction to bring my attention back to your question. “He stole my body and left me in this.”

“So then...that wasn’t...” You look away, as if seeing the man who’s wearing my body. “I knew there was something weird about the way he kissed me. N-nothing happened!”

Though I’m warmed by the assurance — and your care for me — I shrug it off. I would try to stand, but I feel weak and disoriented, so I stay where I am to hide it. And to hide how uncomfortable I am. This is our house, Lois — our home, yet I feel like a stranger. I don’t see things the way I should be able to. I can’t hear the house settling and the wind brushing past the roof and the flow of the water in your fish tank. It’s as if I’ve become a stranger in my own life.

“It’s okay,” I say. “I’ve been trying to get to you all day.”

“And I wouldn’t listen to you.” The sadness on your face is heart-wrenching. I want to take you into my arms and kiss away your self-recriminations, but I don’t. This isn’t the man you married, not on the outside. Since the moment I met you, I’ve done everything in my power — even denied my love for you — to keep from making you uncomfortable. I can’t change that now. So I stay where I am.

“It’s not your fault,” I tell you. “You couldn’t have known.”

I hadn’t even known I wasn’t myself, not until I had seen my reflection. Even then, I had fought against the idea, accepting it only when I realized that I couldn’t use any of my powers and when I heard that the police had identified me as a man named Woody Samms. And when I felt myself so briefly back in my own body and saw you with the imposter. After that, even I couldn’t deny the truth any longer.

“Oh, what you must have been going through.” Warmth and love flood my soul when you stroke your hand through my hair, showing no hint of aversion to my new shell. You’ve always seen to the heart of matters; it’s what makes you so good at cutting through deception and propaganda to get the truth of a story. To have that insightfulness turned on me makes me love you all the more.

Suddenly, your hand pauses, and your eyes widen in horror. “Clark, you’re burning up!”

Your easy use of my name pleases me even in the midst of my disorientation and fear for the future.

“Yeah.” I swallow before continuing. “Lois, I’m sick. I think this body’s sick. I think it’s dying.”

“Dying?” Horror reshapes your beautiful features. I would do anything to chase away the fear, anything at all, so I pull myself to a standing position.

“I don’t know how much time I have. I’ve got to get my own body back.”

You help me rise, your hand warm and comforting on my arm. “He knows your secret. He’s looking for you.”

When the room spins, I fold my arms tightly across my

chest and hurriedly sit in the chair behind me. “That’s not good. I keep finding myself back in my own body, but never for very long. He keeps pushing me out again. Every time it happens, I seem to get weaker.”

“As long as he’s you, he’s unstoppable.”

I notice the strangeness of your remark, but I let it pass without comment. For a long while, I resented Superman; often, I wished to be simply human. Now I just want my own body back. I don’t want to be this stranger. I don’t want to feel different when you touch me or feel like it’s not my place to reach out and hold you. I want things to be the way they were. I love our life, Lois, and I want it back.

“We have to take him when he’s not expecting it,” I say decisively, scrambling to come up with a workable plan.

“We have to get him to relax, but you can’t let on that you know anything.”

“Okay,” you agree bravely, your gaze intent on me.

I pull out the note Becky hastily scribbled for me. “Here’s the phone number for where I’m staying. It’s a motel,” I assure you as hastily as you assured me nothing had happened between you and the body-snatcher. “Call me when he’s most vulnerable.”

I despise myself for what I’m implying. I want my life back, and I’m willing to let you do all the hard work to get it. I’ve sent you in places before when I couldn’t go — like the time my powers were out of control due to the red Kryptonite — but none of those times has hurt as much as now. So soon after growing jealous over Leslie Luckabee’s insinuations, I’m sending you into the arms of a man who looks and sounds exactly like me.

I despise myself because I ask the impossible of you. Yet you give it to me so many times that I suppose it’s only natural I’ve come to expect it. You are the bravest and most brilliant woman I’ve ever met; I don’t doubt that if anyone can stand against someone with all of Superman’s powers and none of Clark Kent’s restraint, it’s you.

I despise myself because I’m not the man you married anymore. Somehow, I’ve changed into a stranger. Yet you don’t seem to realize it. You look at me the same way you look at Clark and Superman. You speak my name just as you always do. I can still remember the tender way you pulled my glasses off this morning and looked at me with such devotion and love that I almost couldn’t breathe.

I need you, Lois. You make me complete. You make me whole. And no matter the situation, you always save me.

And I desperately need to be saved.

Superman has become more to me than a costume and a set of ideals. He’s part of me, a large part, the part of me that sees suffering and instantly moves to correct it. For so long, I feared that I — the alien part of myself — would never be accepted, yet Superman has given me that acceptance. I love wearing the cape and boots, and working with the police officers and firefighters, and helping in situations where hope has faded and disappeared. I love being able to use my abilities and employ my powers and see terror turn to joy.

And Clark is who I am. He’s the man you trusted almost from the beginning, the man who became your friend, the man who won your heart. I don’t want to lose him or give him up. Through every disaster, hardship, or trial, I cling to

Clark Kent. I *need* to be him. I *need* to be him for you...because despite his flaws and insecurities and vulnerabilities, you picked him to give your heart to.

I don't know, anymore, where the distinction between the two men lies. I don't know how to keep them separate. My two identities have blurred into one. But this strange body — this third identity — it's not me. It's not your husband. It's not someone who can help, or who can be accepted by the world or those people who know Clark Kent, or who can live a lifetime as your husband.

So I turn to leave, though it's one of the hardest things I've ever done.

You look up from memorizing the number, a trace of surprise flickering across your face. "You're leaving?"

I flinch away from my guilt, clinging to my conviction that this plan will work. That you'll be able to restore me to who I want to be. "Honey, I can't stay here. He'll be looking for me."

It sounds like an excuse, no matter how true it is.

Without pause or hesitation, you put your arms around me and kiss me. More than anything in the world, I want to pull you into a deep embrace and return the affection. But this isn't your husband. He's an old man who's sick with some unidentified disease. So all I can do is look at you and hope you can see all my love shining there. When I was Superman, I couldn't hide it; every villain in the world knows I would do anything to protect you. When I was Clark, I couldn't hide it; everyone in the city of Metropolis knows I love you. Now, in the body of a stranger, I pray that it's just as apparent as always. My love for you is the unifying force that makes my Superman-self and my Clark-self combine into a cohesive whole. Please, Lois, I beg you, please see it.

"I don't care what body you're in," you say, as if hearing and answering my thoughts. "I'm with you no matter what."

Do you know that this moment is one I'll treasure forever? Do you realize just how much that promise means to me? I'm the one who promised I would never leave you, yet now you give me the same promise. You know my deepest insecurities and most secret fears...and you allay them before they can even begin to fester. Do you understand that I will never forget the way you look now, or the tone of your voice as you make this vow to me, or the feel of your waist beneath my unfamiliar, weak hands?

Of course you do. You know me.

Words fail me, so I simply nod and turn to leave. Then, acting on impulse, I turn and offer a minuscule smile. "That was some forward flip." The sight of your smile pierces my heart. "I love you."

I leave you then. I knew it was the wrong thing to do even as I did it, and it causes only disaster. Kidnapped along with Becky, tortured for information I don't possess, unable to beat my way through the flames to rescue the young woman who tried to help me. The pain of the beating and the flames and the sickness eating away at me, though unfamiliar, helps to keep me focused on my task.

I have to get back to you, Lois. I can't leave you alone with the imposter wearing my face and bearing my powers. What is he doing to you? Are you all right? Has he harmed

you? How could I have left you alone with him?

Even having my body restored to me and seeing the end of the Zarate crime syndicate can't make me stop worrying about you. I barely pause to give a watered-down version of events to Becky and a somewhat more detailed account to the police before I blur into the skies and head back to our house.

Home.

Where you are.

Landing in our living room, I stumble with the relief I feel upon hearing your heart beating upstairs in the bedroom. I take a slight instant to revel in the sound of the house settling, the wind brushing against the roof, the flow of the water in your fish tank. I look around and see all the things I couldn't before. When I spin into my regular clothes, I can't help but realize how much I almost lost. How much I still have.

Because even when I wasn't myself, I still had your love. Everything else pales next to that.

I ascend the stairs quietly, fearful of what I'll find. I can't detect any hints of pain from the sound of your breathing or your heart-rate, but from what little I saw of Woody Samms and from what Becky said about him, I know that he threatened you. I know that he wouldn't hesitate to use my powers to menace you.

Now I'm the one with the powers again. If I take you into my arms, will you remember whatever he did to you? When I look at you, will you see him threatening you?

Will I still be Clark Kent, AKA Superman, in your eyes? Or will I again be a stranger?

The sound of the television filters out through the bedroom. "Amazingly, only one fatality was suffered in the flames. The victim was identified as Woody Samms, 45, of Metropolis."

At the slight increase of your heartbeat, I know you're worried about me, and I quicken my pace. But how do I let you know it's me and not the imposter? How do I reassure you that I'm not the one who died at that warehouse?

Gently, I place my hands over your eyes, just as I did this morning when all we had to worry about was your recovery from the effects of cryo-stasis so soon after Mr. Smith's attack on your mind and where to go for the romantic dinner we had planned. "Guess who," I say softly, and I place a light kiss in your hair, breathing in the scent of your shampoo and your essence as I hadn't been able to do in the other body.

"I don't have to guess!" Your hands cover mine instantly — smaller than mine, yet filled with strength to rival Superman's — and you turn with a joyful, beautiful smile...devoid of any fear or trauma. "I'd know you anywhere."

Emotions so powerful and effervescent that I can't even name them sweep through my body, wringing a sigh from me. My eyes slide closed, imprinting on my mind the image of you and the way you look at this moment, engraving it on my heart for all the coming years.

I love you so much, Lois. I'll never be able to adequately tell you or show you just how much you mean to me. Though I can tell you that you're my everything, it sounds

cliché. And yet...it's the absolute truth, free of any exaggeration.

This time, there's no reason for me to hold myself back. When I take you into my arms and meld my lips with yours, I finally feel, once more, like myself. I'm me again. Clark Kent and Superman, the strange amalgamation of them both that you helped create and keep bound together. More than that, you helped me accept each of them — both of them — in a way that I wouldn't have thought possible. By loving them both, you made me realize neither one is something to hate or despise.

Later, I look down at you, half-asleep in my arms, and I wonder how even my super-powered body can contain everything I feel for you. Maybe it's a good thing I have two personalities; maybe that's the only way I can safely hold all the love I bear for you.

You smile lazily, and I wonder — not for the first time — if you can hear my thoughts. “I told him he wasn't Superman,” you whisper drowsily. “Only you could be Superman.”

“I didn't feel very super,” I admit softly.

You plant a light kiss on my neck and thread your fingers through my hair. “And that, Clark, is one of your more endearing traits. Superman is the wonderful hero he is because he has Clark Kent's character and integrity. And Clark Kent will never fail anyone because he has Superman's strength of will and determination. That's why you make the perfect man.”

“I'm not perfect,” I tell you somberly. “I'm not even whole unless you're with me.”

“Good.” Your smile lights up the room with your inner brilliance. “Because I'm not whole without you. It makes us even.”

“Lois, you...” I have to pause and clear my throat of the hoarseness that's invaded my voice. “*You* are Superman's strength and Clark's integrity. Superman is what and who he is because I only did what you said he should do. And Clark...Clark wouldn't even exist anymore if you hadn't loved him.”

“He'd better exist,” you insist mock-sternly. “The world needs a Clark Kent. The world needs a Superman.”

“And I need you.”

The intensity of your expression — the tenderness of your heart so apparent in every feature of your body — is enough to ground me to this earth. “That's exactly what I was going to say.”

“Uncanny how that works,” I tease. “I'm almost certain you read my mind half the time.”

Your laugh drives the shadows away and pours sunlight into my soul, revitalizing and healing me. “Who needs to read your mind, Clark? Everything you think and feel is written all over your face and spoken with every action you make. All I have to do is look at you.”

“Thank you for looking.” I startle myself with the words. I've thought them so often, yet I've never spoken them aloud. As if it is such an immutable fact of life that it doesn't even need to be addressed, like breathing. “Thank you for looking and seeing me and recognizing me. And loving me.”

“You made me look. You made me see you.”

“I must not be as good at that as you are,” I reply.

“Because you made me see you the instant you walked into Perry's office.”

“Well...” You shrug with false modesty, a grin twitching at the corners of your mouth. It's so cute that I have to kiss you, though that doesn't deter you from finishing your statement. “Not everyone can be as talented as I am.”

“*No one* is as talented as you,” I assure you with another kiss. “Or as brilliant.” Another kiss. “Or as brave.” And another. “Or as beautiful.”

“You're running out of B words,” you say a bit breathlessly. You don't sound too worried.

“That's why there's a whole alphabet,” I claim. “So I'll never run out of words to describe you.”

“I can describe you in one,” you assert with all your usual flair for competitiveness.

“And what's that?” I ask curiously, not averse to losing if it's to you. Though, come to think of it, I believe you still owe me fifty bucks for the night we finally did get to go on our first date. “How could you possibly describe me in *one* word?” Particularly, I add silently, when there are two of me.

“Clark, you are so...good.”

I stare at you, caught by the simplicity of your answer. “Both of me?” I ask, only to wince at the yearning in my tone.

You frown at me. “Both? What are you talking about? There's only you. The man I love. My husband.”

As much as I love seeing your impish grin, I can't stop myself from leaning forward and kissing you, given breath and life and love from your touch.

Me.

Clark Kent.

Superman.

One man.

The man you love. The man who loves you.

It's enough.

THE END