

# The Real Me

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Summary: He's starting to realize that if he wants a real relationship with Lois Lane, then she deserves to know who he really is.

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The sun shined brightly down on the throng of people gathered near the Metropolis Court House. It was Saturday, which meant that the street was closed off for a couple blocks in each direction to make way for the weekly Farmer's Market. Vendors sold almost anything imaginable in the booths that lined the street, from food to crafts to clothing and everything in between. On this late morning, Clark and Lois found themselves mingling among the crowd, taking in the sights on what wasn't a date, necessarily, though it felt like it might as well have been. Their first official date was only a week behind them and the change to their relationship that it had brought still felt very new. It was almost as if they were really getting to know each other for the first time, seeing parts to each other that they hadn't noticed before. As they strolled through the crowds, Clark's hand found Lois's, and far from shying away from the contact, she gladly took it, pulling him closer to her as they fought through the crowds. At one point they stopped and shared a breakfast burrito, each taking bites in turn, the act intimate in a way that was novel to them. The idea of sharing food with her would've been preposterous before, but ever since their date, the exquisite bite of shared dessert, and that kiss, it didn't seem odd at all.

Clark had been determined to make the most of this time with her, tuning out the sounds of the rest of the city and focusing on Lois. Metropolis could get by without Superman for one Saturday morning, and for the first few hours, it did. The two of them spent some time parked on a bench people watching, commenting on the colorful mix of patrons that passed by, drawing a few in for conversation from time to time. Clark teased Lois that she might actually get a reputation for being personable after spending a morning chatting with strangers. She took it in stride, teasing him back that his Boy Scout image might take a hit if people heard the commentary they shared while watching the crowds. As they wandered around later, they tried the samples offered at various booths, chatted with the vendors, and watched the musical acts performing at various street corners. At one point Clark stopped and bought Lois an orchid, one that would look perfect on the little side table in her living room. All in all, it was a morning to remember, and Clark couldn't remember when he had been happier, more relaxed. He was considering asking her to the art show at the civic center a couple blocks away when his hearing began to pick up something. From the apartments in the buildings lining the street, the televisions and radios all began to relay the same report. He tried steadfastly to block it away, to stay true to his promise to only see Lois, but it became hard to ignore the urgency of the voices, so he listened. And what he heard made him grow cold.

News out of Nebraska stated that a train carrying oil tankers had derailed in a small town and sparks from the accident had set off an inferno. A whole town faced devastation; unknown numbers

of people were missing. This was something he couldn't ignore, shouldn't ignore, but... he badly wanted to.

Clark stopped his forward progress, eliciting a curious look from Lois. Coming up with excuses to quickly leave had become old hat over the last year and a half, but things were different now. He couldn't pull out the "Cheese of the Month" excuse in the middle of a private moment and expect Lois to buy it or be happy about it. But there were only so many plausible excuses he could use and none immediately sprang to mind.

"Clark, is something wrong?" Lois asked, concern evident on her face now.

"I..." Clark started, but then stopped and sighed. "I have to go," he said, resignation in his voice, then let go of her hand.

"What? Why?" Lois said, her concern quickly morphing to confusion, with anger soon to follow.

"I just remembered that the plumber was supposed to come over to my apartment this morning," he said, inwardly cringing at how weak that sounded. His voice didn't hold the conviction that it used to when he made these excuses — he wasn't even trying to sell it, didn't really have the heart to, and she could tell.

"No, you didn't," she said, her eyes narrowing. "What's going on?"

He took a couple steps away from her, mentally pleading with her to just accept it like she always had before, but her face told him that it wouldn't happen this time. "I'm sorry, Lois, I really am, but I HAVE to go. I promise I'll call you tonight."

He backed up slowly and watched as she tried to process what he was saying, looking for the usual consternation, but what he saw made him pause momentarily. There had always been some anger or frustration before when he left like this, but today there was something new. Today she looked hurt. This was the first time Superman had interrupted them in the middle of a date, or almost date as was the case today, and running off in the middle of personal time was a different thing entirely than running off in the middle of a story or at work. This probably felt like he was tossing her aside, rejecting her, that she was less important than something that he couldn't even bring himself to tell her about.

His heart broke a little as he watched, but he didn't know what else he could do. Every moment he stood there staring into her eyes, a little bit more of that town in Nebraska burned. He really did have to go. With a resigned sigh, he turned and jogged through the crowd in search of a quiet place, then took off. But that look of hurt on Lois's face lingered in his vision long after he left.

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Cleaning up in Nebraska had taken most of the afternoon. By the time he made his way back to Metropolis, the sun was hanging low in the sky and his mood was rather stormy. There had been lives lost in the accident, and most of the downtown had been burned to the ground in the resulting fire. It would've undoubtedly been worse if he hadn't been there, but it still felt as though he hadn't done enough. Amplifying those thoughts was the persistent vision of Lois and the nagging thoughts of what leaving her that morning meant for him, for them.

For the longest time, he had told himself that his ultimate goal in a relationship with Lois was to have her accept him for who he really was. She had been in love with Superman from the first time he stepped in front of her in the suit, but for the longest time she thought of Clark as an annoyance, then later as a friend, but never as a love interest. That had begun to change recently, and the kiss shared a week earlier had made it clear that she now considered Clark more than just a friend. It was what he had always dreamed of, but she still held a torch for his other persona. That continued infatuation made him wary, made him believe that he still had work to do to win her over. But he also had to admit that the whole situation was partially his fault. After a long, frustrating day, it was so tempting to float over to her apartment and step into the window that she always left open to him, to talk to her about what

he had done and seen as Superman, to get things off his chest that he would otherwise keep inside. Sure, he had been careful to drop the innuendo that he used to use with her back when just a glimpse of her longing for Superman was enough to help him endure the coldness she felt toward his other self. But things had changed.

Somewhere deep inside, the naïve part of himself believed, even hoped, that he could keep things as they were, that he could always have things both ways. Even while he tried to convince her to view Clark romantically, he could still tease her with visits by his other persona, keeping her in the dark about the fact that they were the same person. He couldn't tell her the truth, the reasoning went, until she totally committed to loving Clark. Only then would he know that her love was real, that she didn't still harbor feelings for some fantasy character that was only fiction, after all. But the more he thought about it — and he had thought about it a lot while staring down the inferno that afternoon — he began to realize that this course of action wasn't realistic, or fair. He expected her to fall out of love with part of himself in favor of the other part, before telling her that, surprise, they were both the same person to begin with. What sense did that make? At the same time, as he kept her in the dark about his other identity, he was expecting her to just blindly accept the fact that he kept disappearing on her. Today might have been the first time he had left her in the middle of a date, but it certainly wouldn't be the last. How could he expect her to love him, to accept him, to believe that she was the most important part of his life, if he kept lying to her and seemingly rejecting her? In her place, he would be angry and hurt, and he couldn't expect anything less from her. So his thinking and his actions had to change if he wanted his relationship with her to move forward.

The part of himself that still worried that Lois didn't truly accept the real him told him that he couldn't just visit her apartment and announce that Superman was Clark Kent, even if that was the easy answer. It would be a shock, and it would be entirely possible for her to take the announcement the wrong way. She would feel stupid, maybe feel used, certainly would be angry. The trick to earning Lois' acceptance, apart from being extremely patient, was to make her feel that she was in charge of the situation. If he blurted out his secret, that put him in charge of the conversation. But if he helped her to find the truth on her own, let her follow the clues to her own conclusion, maybe he could avoid the hurt feelings and anger. Or maybe not...but he had to try. He had to do something, because he couldn't go on hurting Lois like he had hurt her today.

Hovering outside her building, he clenched his hands into fists, set his jaw, and slowly flew toward that open window. Now that he had decided on his course of action, he felt fear starting to creep into his subconscious, but he mentally pushed it away. Tonight. He would set her down the path tonight. Then, hopefully, he could begin to rebuild her trust in him, the real Clark Kent, the one that only his parents really knew. And then he could earn her love.

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Lois sat in her living room reading a magazine, the cool evening breeze causing the sheers in front of her open window to flutter gently. She tensed slightly every time they moved, expecting to see Superman standing there, feeling disappointment wash over her when he wasn't. Tonight, of all nights, she needed him to stop by. She needed a friend, someone to chase away the dark mood caused by her only other close friend, someone who she had begun to think of as so much more, but now she wasn't sure.

Her almost date with Clark that morning had been a lot of fun. Sure, they had hung out plenty of other times in the past, before they officially started dating, but there was something about this morning — the brightness of the day, the feel of his hand in hers, the teasing, the amusement and longing in his gaze when he

looked at her. It was... magical. As the morning progressed toward noon, she was beginning to think that the prospect of more mornings like that one, more time with Clark period, would be a very pleasant thing. But then he got that all too familiar faraway look in his eyes, made a weak excuse, and left her there, alone among the crowd. It wasn't the first time he had left her like that, but she had thought that maybe the fact that they were now in a relationship would somehow curtail his disappearing spells. Obviously it hadn't, and she could only conclude that it was something about her that made him run. He didn't even try to sound halfway convincing in his excuse, and this time she wasn't ready to forgive him, despite his apology. She was beginning to think that maybe she needed to take a step back from considering a romantic relationship with Clark if he had so little regard for her.

Lois sighed and lowered the magazine, closing her eyes and leaning her head back. She couldn't concentrate on the articles anyway, not with her subconscious as occupied as it was at the moment. She supposed she could take her mind off things by getting up and doing something...cleaning the bathroom or doing some laundry, maybe? But before she could convince herself to get up, the curtains fluttered again, and this time a pair of red boots landed on the floor of her apartment, a hand pushing the sheers aside. Lois smiled as Superman took another step forward, his expression hard to read. He looked a little grimy, no doubt the result of spending the day fighting an oil fire in the Midwest. Usually he greeted her with a little smile of his own, but tonight he seemed preoccupied.

"Superman?" she said, eliciting a sigh from him as he crossed his arms across his chest. "Is everything okay?" She sat up a little taller, pushing the magazine off her lap and giving him her full attention.

"It's...been a long day," he said with a weak smile.

"Train derailment. I heard," Lois said.

He bobbed his head once. "That was part of it, yeah, but..." he seemed to become self-conscious, then gestured toward the couch. "Can I sit down?"

"Of course," she answered. Lois noticed that for a brief second, nervousness flashed across his face, but it disappeared before she could blink. What could he have to be nervous about? He sat at the far end up the couch, well away from her, and clasped his hands together, staring at them for a moment in silence. "Did you want me to get you something..." Lois said, gesturing toward the kitchen, but Superman shook his head.

"No, thanks," he said. "I actually was just thinking..." he looked at her, his features molded into the pleasant expression she was used to, although this time it seemed to be hiding something deeper. "It seems like I find myself at your window at least once a week. I don't know what it is, if it's just the opportunity to talk openly with a friend, or that fact that you make me feel..." he smiled and cocked his head sideways, catching himself saying something that he didn't necessarily want her to hear. "...that you always know what to say to put things in perspective," he corrected himself. "Coming here is usually the highlight of my day."

"I'm always happy to see you," Lois said cautiously. She couldn't help thinking that there was a "but" coming and she found herself dreading what he was going to say next. There was a time when any statement from him that mentioned feelings toward her would've been welcomed with some sort of celebration, and her heart was certainly beating a little faster because of it. But she hadn't been blind to the fact that his visits had become more professional, that he was keeping her at arm's length even though he still gave her a private audience. He felt more like a friend than a love interest now, and this was beginning to feel a bit like a break up. "In fact, I'm glad you came tonight. Talking to you is usually the highlight of my day, too."

He scooted forward on the couch fractionally. "It occurred to

me, though, that this isn't the way that real friends interact, is it? Is there anyone else in the world that you would allow to enter your apartment unannounced, that you would put your life on hold to speak to? I feel like a bit of a heel for expecting that of you, for taking advantage of your willingness to do that. It's not fair to you."

Lois opened her mouth, not sure what to say for a moment. It was a fair question, she supposed. "I just want to see you, and if that's what it takes..." she said with a shrug. That's what it was about, wasn't it? Superman wasn't someone she could expect to spend time with in the real world outside these walls. He didn't pal around with friends, he didn't do things for recreation or go out to eat. Here it was just the two of them, here he could be himself, and here he could say whatever was on his mind. That probably wasn't true of anywhere else in the world.

"But that's not what it takes, or at least it doesn't have to be. I'd like to, I don't know, talk with you over dinner sometime, or take a walk with you around Centennial Park. Like normal people do."

Lois gave a quick laugh. "No offense Superman, but you're not exactly normal," she said, looking down toward his chest. After a moment, though, her gaze returned to his face, and what she saw there surprised her. His eyes appeared to be twinkling, his smile looked like he held a secret.

"Lois, where is it that you think I go after I leave here? Where do you think I spend my time when I'm not out helping people?" he asked, leaning back and relaxing.

"I don't know," she said with a shrug. "Floating up in the sky? Looking for bad guys?" It wasn't something she had thought about, really. For a man who could be anywhere in the world in moments, he could spend his time literally anywhere, and part of her imagined him perched on a mountaintop somewhere, listening, waiting. But the little smile on his face told her that maybe she had been wrong.

"I have an apartment here in Metropolis," he said, "paid for with money earned from my job."

She furrowed her brow. "What about all the money from people selling Superman dolls and comic books? From the deals that Murray Brown guy makes for you? Couldn't you use that for a place to stay?"

Superman smiled and shook his head. "That all goes to charity. Superman wouldn't dream of taking money from anyone. But the real me... I have to eat. I have to pay the electric bill. So I have a job."

Lois found herself speechless for a moment. "The real you...?" she managed to say, though a thousand other questions suddenly leapt to mind.

"Has a name, a college degree, driver's license, credit cards... a couple pieces from the Ikea catalog. The real me is a pretty decent chef, and fairly handy around the house. What, do you think I walk around in this outfit all the time?" he said, gesturing toward himself, his smile growing. "I'm a lot more normal than you think."

She stared at him dumbfounded, as if she was seeing him for the first time. How could he be anything other than Superman? How could someone who could do what he could do pass as anything less than extraordinary? "But... I thought you were an alien, came from another planet."

"When I was a baby," he said softly. "I was found, adopted, raised by a great family. I was a pretty ordinary kid until around junior high, when my powers started showing up. The flying didn't happen until I was almost out of high school. That was... something special."

"But you never told anyone," Lois said. Superman first appeared a couple years ago, but it didn't take any special observational talents to see that the man in front of her, whoever he really was, had been out of high school for quite a few years.

Lois liked to think that she had a nose for news. Even going back to her college years, she's fairly certain she would've been interested if she had heard stories of a flying man, of someone so strong he could lift mountains, but she had never heard anything like that, not even after Superman arrived, when she had actively looked. So it stood to reason that he hid himself, his talents, from the world in that time. "God, you must've been so lonely," she said, scooting toward him.

He shrugged, his expression becoming tender, but not sad. "I could... can always talk to my parents. They know everything. I told you that my mother made my suit, surely you remember." Lois closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She had completely forgotten about that. In the excitement of the moment, it had been ignored in favor of the less mundane aspects of his appearance. "It always surprised me that you never looked for me after that, knowing there was a guy out there whose mother owned a sewing machine and bought several stores out of blue spandex." He seemed amused at the fact, though Lois was still too surprised to know what to think or feel.

"This is... I mean, it's... educational, I guess," Lois said with a shake of the head. "And I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but... why tell me all this?"

His smile grew. "Because I want you to find me."

All of a sudden it became clear what he was doing. There were little breadcrumbs, laid down to try and lead her to him. He was entrusting her with his greatest secret, something that he had probably never told anyone, something that she hadn't been worthy of knowing, apparently, until this moment. What had initially felt like a break up was now almost beginning to feel like a proposition, like he was opening himself up to a deeper relationship with her. It was exciting and confusing at the same time. "Couldn't you just tell me who you are? Give me your name?"

"What fun would that be?" he answered. His eyes twinkled for a moment before his expression began to morph into something more serious. "Anyway, this is about you making a choice. If you prefer not to know who I am under the suit, I will respect that. I will be disappointed, but at least I know that's your decision. But if you do want to meet me, the real me, then you can have that. That's my decision, what I want."

A wave of emotion washed over her as she listened to him, bringing goosebumps to her arms. It was a gift, borne of infinite patience and faith in her. She wanted to hug him, to give immediate confirmation that she did in fact want that, but something in the back of her mind held her back. Before she could resolve what, Superman was speaking again.

"I'll even make it easy for you," he said. "Tomorrow night, 9 PM, the Midnight Club. I will be there, barring a big emergency of some sort," he continued with a wave of the hand.

"But, how will I know it's you?" Lois asked. Superman opened his mouth as if to say something, but he closed it quickly. She could guess what he was going to say, that she'd just know and that was that, but she wasn't so sure that was true. The prospect of going up to some unknown person she thought was him and being wrong... Well, that was just embarrassing. She could make a complete fool of herself and not even realize it, which would undoubtedly take the fun out of what could be a really special situation. Lois stood abruptly and looked around, trying to think of something that she could give him that would confirm his identity without him having to say anything. After a moment her eyes found the kitchen counter, and the loaf of bread sitting off to the side. Quickly, she went over and took the twist tie off the bread, tying a loose knot onto the end of the bag before heading over to Superman.

"Give me your right hand," she said. When he held it out, she looped the twist tie around his ring finger a couple times before twisting the ends together and wrapping that around the palm side

of his finger. She kept a hold of his hand for a long moment before letting go and looking at his face again. What she saw made the goosebumps rise up again, the barely contained emotion obvious in his expression. A twinge of long forgotten feelings for him surged though her, before she realized why it was that she had hesitated a few moment earlier. "I'm seeing someone, you know," she said, cringing slightly at how abrupt the statement seemed.

"I know," he said in a raspy voice. He exhaled and stood, his expression softening. "And I'm happy for you, truly I am."

"Then, what is this about, really? Dinner together, walks in the park... it sounds romantic to me."

He sighed and looked away. "It just seems like all this," he gestured around the apartment, finally pinching the fabric of his outfit, "is some sort of fantasy. Superman is fiction, Lois. Yes, there's some part of me that comes through, that you bring out of me, but it's just a small part. I appear at your window as your hero, the 'God in a cape,' and you always give me a smile and an encouraging word when I need it." Lois blushed as his "God in a cape" comment, but she let it pass. "I suppose we both provide a little something to each other that we're missing in our real lives, but in a way that's safe, that avoids any kind of emotional investment. We can't keep this up forever — surely you can see that. At some point our lives will have to move forward. Maybe the relationship with the person you're seeing will get deeper, maybe you'll just get tired of me... maybe I'll have to move on again, like I've done so many times before. I don't want to hold you back, Lois, but I do want to stay your friend, and I want to stop pretending. The only way to do that is to move our relationship into the world of reality."

She nodded. He was right, of course. His visits did have an air of fantasy, enhanced by the fact that it was HER fantasy, one that nobody else in the world got to experience. It had occurred to her that it would have to end at some point, but she preferred not to think about it, to enjoy his presence while she could. But... did Clark know about the fact that Superman flew into her window at night? What would he think if he did? As mad as she was at him for running out on her, she conceded that he had every right to be mad at her for her relationship with Superman. She did put her evenings on hold. She kept her windows open in the crime-filled city just for the possibility of having her hero stop by, however briefly. She was sure Clark wouldn't begrudge her friendship with Superman, but knowing that he visited her here, this way... that had the potential to hurt him. "I agree," Lois said after a long moment.

Superman smiled and took a step toward the window. "Then, until tomorrow," he said.

As he was stepping onto the ledge, a thought suddenly popped into her head. "Have I met the real you before?" she blurted out. "In public, I mean."

His smile was maddeningly even, and he stepped up and floated gently out of the window. "Goodnight, Lois," he said, a whooshing sound indicating a moment later that he was gone. It wasn't a denial, Lois realized. That meant that they probably had met and she hadn't known him. The idea caused her legs to feel weak, and she stumbled back and plopped onto the couch. Who was he? How had they met? There were so many questions with so many potential answers that her mind had a hard time keeping any of them straight.

Closing her eyes, she let herself revel in her fantasy for one last night, let her mind wander over the facts that Superman had given her and what they meant. She imagined Superman pushing a cart through a grocery store, standing in line at the DMV, sitting through a college lecture... playing in his yard as a boy. Perfectly normal situations for normal people, but all places that Superman had no business being. But, the little voice in the back of her mind told her, he had done all those things, that he lived as a real person in the real world, an anonymous face in the crowd. Somehow,

though, she had trouble imagining Superman wearing anything other than the blue spandex and red cape, even though he probably wore real clothing most of the time. Nobody credible had come forward saying that they knew who Superman was — no landlords, co-workers or classmates, not even the anonymous person off the street. Even in a city of more than a million people, he had hidden himself so well that not one of them could see him. It made her feel better for not recognizing him herself, she supposed, but it still made her question whether she ever really knew him at all.

So what DID he look like when he wasn't wearing his Superman outfit? The superhero couldn't be more open in his appearance — his eyes were unobstructed by a mask, his body shape and build were... well-defined under the spandex. Maybe his civilian identity was worn like a disguise, covering him up. Maybe he wore a wig, or something similar to a mask. What if he wore glasses? Those wouldn't serve the same purpose as a mask, though he certainly wouldn't need the correction they brought. Maybe he had a fake nose or wore colored contacts, had a fake mole, or... maybe it was none of those things. He did say that he had lived on Earth most of his life, which meant he had friends that he couldn't fool with a disguise, yet they still didn't see him when they saw Superman. What if his disguise was simply his personality, the fact that, whoever he was, nobody would ever believe that Superman could possibly be him? Maybe he was amiable, easygoing, faded into the background, something considerably less than the force of personality that Superman was. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking, she thought, realizing with a frown that she was projecting onto him the personality traits that she desired in a man... that she found in Clark. With a frustrated grunt, Lois forced her mind to change its focus.

It occurred to her to wonder what kind of job Superman could hold when he wasn't busy saving someone. He was obviously intelligent and kind. If he had a bachelor's degree, then that meant that he probably held a white collar job, though it seemed like he would be better doing something that involved brute strength, like construction work. She had never thought to ask the types of probing questions that would reveal his knowledge base. Was he an engineer? A doctor? A teacher? Whatever it was, it had to afford him the opportunity to leave during the middle of the day, since he seemed to make rescues at all times of day. That excluded any job that involved meetings or appointments, or required rigorous attendance. It probably also excluded anything that involved hourly billings, although, she thought with a smile, it would be interesting to see how much real work someone with Superman's speed could accomplish in an hour. He would be the world's most affordable attorney, she thought with a chuckle — able to work an entire case in the matter of minutes. But... that probably wasn't it. Maybe, whatever he did, he worked from home. Or maybe he had some job that brought him in and out of the office throughout the day, not unlike her own job.

With a sigh, Lois shook her head and made herself stop. She could go crazy going through all these scenarios. She looked at the phone, briefly wondering if she should call Clark and discuss this with him, but ultimately deciding that Superman had come to her, confided in her, asked her to find him, not Clark. Anyway, she was still mad at him, and her discussion with the Man of Steel hadn't changed that. So... maybe she could go to the Planet and do some research? It wasn't particularly late. The computers there would be able to search through information much more efficiently than her home computer and frustratingly slow dial-up modem. But what would she search for, exactly? Superman had been pretty generic in the clues that he had dropped, not giving her much to work with. She supposed she could seize on the little nugget of information regarding his mother and the fact that she bought a lot of fabric for his suits, but that could be true of anyone making costumes for whatever reason — school plays, Hollywood

productions, you name it. She could possibly try to dig up information on any UFO's or meteorites spotted in the late sixties, when his spacecraft probably came to Earth, but that would probably mean having to reach out to the tin foil hat crowd, and they were notoriously...flexible with the truth. She could look for people who were new to town as of a year and a half ago, but that list was probably pretty sizeable.

Giving a frustrated grunt, Lois stood up from the couch. It was becoming evident that the answers to her questions would have to wait until tomorrow night, at the Midnight Club. Until then it would be sweet torture. Without another thought, she grabbed her purse and went for the door. A walk would help get her mind off things, and help time move a little bit faster. Tomorrow it would all become clear, but it seemed so far away.

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The Midnight Club resided in the middle of Metropolis's entertainment district, a couple blocks away from theater row, situated among dozens of other similar clubs and restaurants. Just inside the door was a small dance floor and stage for live acts, though on slower nights like this, high tables were set up across the floor, creating a more intimate area for patrons to socialize. Toward the back of the club were four pool tables and three dart boards, which were always busy even when the club wasn't. In the middle of the club was a sizable bar with seating along three sides, a decent selection of hard alcohol displayed on a series of shelves mounted on a divider wall in the center. In all, the club was large enough to not feel claustrophobic, but small enough that it was possible to see around the whole place once you stepped in the door. It wasn't a gimmicky bar and the prices were reasonable, so a decent number of people could generally be found inside, even on a Sunday night. This was someplace where you couldn't miss someone if you were looking for them, but you would never be there alone, and that's what Clark was counting on.

He had been there a couple times before with guys from the office or other friends. He found the atmosphere to be relaxed and comfortable, which was a good thing considering how nervous he had been all day. The day before, when he had been tortured by the mental image of Lois's anguish, he had been absolutely certain that revealing himself to her was the right thing to do. Only then could he stop hurting her, and only then could she truly accept him. But today, after having a night to sleep on it, he was second-guessing himself. Far from making his life easier and clearing the way to a happy and loving relationship with Lois, it was entirely possible that finding out his identity would be the very thing that pushed her away, that the fact he kept this from her for so long would cause way more hurt than his disappearing act. In truth, he was terrified of what her reaction would be. But, the more sensible part of himself meekly asserted, the fact that she had feelings for him, for both his guises, should count for something. So should the fact that he had made this her choice. Even if she was mad, at least she would know the truth, for better or worse. Even if she stormed away and proclaimed him the scum of the Earth, he was ready to fight for her, ready to show her what she meant to him. No, he wasn't about to let her go quietly.

Still, he decided as he looked impatiently at his watch, it was probably best to do what he could to set the mood and help guide her emotions down the right path. He dug around in his pocket and approached the juke box, pulling out a few quarters and inserting them into the slot. Lois would be due there in a few minutes and he wanted the music coming over the speakers to be appropriately sappy. He picked a couple rock ballads, and a few songs with "love" in the title, silently apologizing to any of the club patrons who were there that night to drown their sorrows after a break up or bad fight. Next he wandered to the bar, ordering a soda. Then he took up a spot at a tall table on the far side of the dance floor, away from most of the crowd, but situated such that it would be easily visible upon first entering the club.

As he waited, he absently tapped the twist tie around his right ring finger against the glass. That little thing had caught a few glances over the last day, especially when he was out on rescues. Wearing any type of jewelry when, say, taking people from a burning building probably wasn't advisable, but it was snug enough that it slipped under his aura, keeping it safe from harm. He briefly wondered if that meant that, at some point in the far future, if he was lucky enough to convince Lois to walk down the aisle with him, then he could wear a wedding ring out.... He shook his head and made himself stop. First things first. The future held no promises. All he could do right now was stay the course and wait patiently for her to walk into the bar. He stood up a little straighter, tried to summon some confidence that wasn't immediately forthcoming, and allowed himself a small smile. His life would be changing drastically in a few moments, one way or the other, and he was as ready as he would ever be.

He took another sip from his drink, gave a contented sigh, and watched the door.

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Lois stood across the street from the Midnight Club, watching its neon sign blink slowly, seeing patrons occasionally entering and leaving the club, none seemingly aware of or caring about her presence. She was now probably ten minutes late, though she had at least been in front of the club that whole time, staring, waiting, thinking...terrified.

The day to this point had crawled by, her brain torturing her with wild scenarios and theories, her emotions shifting constantly. At one point she had been convinced that Superman was playing some sort of practical joke on her, as if he had it in him to do that. At another point, she found herself angry at him for convincing her that Superman was some paragon of virtue since obviously he had been hiding a giant secret from her, from the whole world, for years. But, she decided, she couldn't be mad at him for that, since that righteous image of him mostly came from her imagination. He had never said that he was a model of honesty, he had never said that he was without sin. What he had said was that he held values that he tried to live by, and he tried to make an example of himself. He make the world a better place through his actions, and that was admirable. Even the most virtuous people were allowed to make mistakes from time to time, and she had no doubt that he was far from the perfect person she had always imagined. It was strange to think that Superman had feet of clay and was susceptible to the same failings as everyone else, but she supposed it should be comforting, too.

She kept trying to imagine the person she would see when she finally did meet him, but was no closer to doing so now than she had been when he left her apartment the night before. She had spent a large part of the day wandering the city, thinking, observing. Every man she saw was examined closely, their faces compared to that of her hero. What would that man look like with his hair pulled down, without a beard, in different clothing? Was there recognition in his eyes when he saw her? If so, was it because of all the posters plastered across town with her and Clark on them, or was it because he knew her somehow? She found no answers, and no green twist ties, and instead began to grow weary. It was silly, of course — Superman was giving himself to her, handing his identity over without expecting anything in return, and somehow she felt the need to look for him despite that, to find him first. What that would accomplish, she wasn't sure. Nobody ever said she was patient, though.

Still, she had to ask herself why this was so important to her. Why was she out here tonight? Why did she need to know who the real Superman was? It was true that they were friends, but there was a time when she wanted so much more from him. While those feeling had mostly gone by the wayside, it wouldn't take much to summon them again, and she knew that this could be the thing that brought them back. A part of her was absolutely giddy at the

prospect, but another part of her, something much deeper, was wary. Even after he walked out on her, she couldn't deny that she had rather strong feelings for Clark. His many charms could certainly trump one bad action, and she really did want to try to make her relationship with him work. However she viewed this night, however she framed her relationship with Superman, she couldn't escape the strong feeling that it seemed like cheating, like she was pushing Clark aside for her old flame. That's what kept her out on the sidewalk, staring at the club, wondering if she should go in and face him.

Well, she thought with a sigh, he WAS Superman. He was probably looking through the wall at her even now, well aware of her presence. It was probably best to get it over with, then maybe let him know that their new reality didn't change her relationship with him, and move on with life.

Her mind made up, Lois gathered herself, and walked confidently across the street, and through the doors of the club. She stopped a couple steps inside the door, absorbing the scene, looking at faces. At the bar were a half dozen people, most as couples, none looking toward the door. People in the back were playing games, their thoughts obviously far away from her. Her eyes swept around, making note of the people she saw, trying to locate solitary individuals, before, ultimately, they came to rest on... Clark?

Lois frowned. What was he doing there? He was a known friend of Superman, she supposed, so it was possible that he had gotten the same visit that she had last night. Maybe the hero wanted to make his identity known to both of them at once, or...? Lois noticed that Clark was looking at her with a small smile, though she could tell he was nervous. On the table in front of him, his right hand gripped a glass of clear liquid, and her eyes immediately became aware of a swath of green on a finger.

His ring finger.

Her hands flew up to her mouth as the world seemed to constrict all around her. She could almost hear a clicking sound as all the pieces seemed to come together in her mind at the same time. It all made sense — the running off, the excuses, the strange things he said upon occasion that made no sense, but put in context made all the sense in the world. The way he seemed to know things that he shouldn't be able to know, see things that he shouldn't be able to see. The things he did, the times he left, it wasn't because of something she did or any desire on his part to humiliate her. It was all because Clark was... he was... Superman.

The way she had looked at her hero at the beginning, the way she had treated Clark... it was no wonder that Superman flew through her open window at every opportunity. It was plainly obvious that Clark was in love with her and probably had been for a very long time, even if he never said as much. And if that was the case, then he undoubtedly drank in the affection she showered on her hero during their private meetings and used it to sustain himself when she treated his other persona like dirt. She wanted to cry in frustration, she wanted to apologize profusely, but she found that her legs were taking her toward him, almost running, her breath catching in her throat as tears started to gather in the corner of her eyes. It only took a moment before she was in front of him. Without hesitation, without really slowing down at all, she flung her arms around him, found his mouth with hers, and let all her thoughts fade away. The kiss was eager, hungry, and she could feel him responding to her in the same way she responded to him. It was the release of all her old preconceptions and fears, all the things that held her back from him before that moment. And it was spectacular.

As the world began to seep back into her consciousness, she became aware of the music playing over the club's sound system. Roger Daltrey was screeching for love to reign down on him, even as Lois became aware of the tears streaming down her face, raining onto Clark's shirt. As they pulled apart, she smiled broadly,

let out a quick laugh, and let her eyes meet his.

"It's you," she said, shifting her gaze down to the twist tie wrapped around his finger. She brought one of her hands from around his neck to grasp his hand, running her thumb over the tie before intertwining her fingers in his. She looked at his face again, taking in the details, wondering how she had missed him for so long when he had been in plain sight. The glasses, worn like a mask, the career that allowed him to slip out of the office without anyone batting an eyelash, the amiable personality that allowed him to fade into the background... She had figured all of it out, but she wouldn't let herself even consider that he could be the person she was looking for.

He nodded and smiled shyly. "It is," he answered.

"That's... a huge relief," she said, eliciting an amused gaze from him.

"I thought you were supposed to be angry," Clark said lightly, wrapping his free arm around her waist, holding her firmly, possessively, against him. There would've been a time when the closeness would've made her uncomfortable, but now it just felt right, natural. "I had this big speech planned out, a bunch of arguments and counter-arguments against all the ways that I am a no good lying liar or the biggest rat in the history of mankind. I don't think I expected you to be relieved."

Lois melted a little into his embrace, leaning into him, knowing that a man who could wrestle hurricanes could certainly hold her weight without any trouble. "Give it time, I'm sure the anger will show up eventually, once I get a chance to think everything through. But for now..." she gave a contented sigh, letting the music wash over her. "I stood outside that door for the longest time, trying to convince myself to come in, because the more I thought about it, the more that indulging in this meeting with..." she glanced around and lowered her voice to a whisper, "Superman felt like cheating on you, Clark." Her voice returned to its normal volume at the end of the sentence. "But I came in, because I couldn't let a friend down, and now..." she looked into his eyes again, seeing raw affection reflected there, mirroring her own feelings perfectly. "Now I have everything I ever wanted. The man I was beginning to think of as much more than a partner and best friend, and the man that had always sparked that raw desire in me, all in one perfect package. And I want to enjoy that for a while." She used her free hand to caress the area under his ear, gently pulling his head down and capturing his lips with her own for another short kiss, this one much sweeter and gentler than before. As they pulled apart, she bit her lower lip and turned away, looking absently toward the ground. "But the biggest relief is knowing that you didn't leave yesterday, or any of those other times, because something I did drove you away."

She heard him sigh as he gently squeezed her hand. "I wanted to apologize for that. It's actually part of why I did all this." The arm that had been draped behind her back fell away and was used to gesture as he continued to speak. It was one of the little personality quirks of his that, she realized with some surprise, shone through no matter what wardrobe he was wearing. His voice became soft, yet forceful. "Making those dumb excuses, covering for when I need to leave to take care of something, has almost become a reflex at this point. The hiding and the subterfuge was all drilled into me a long time ago. My dad used to worry that the government would come and take me away if anyone knew what I could do, and he wasn't wrong."

"Trask," she whispered, and he nodded.

"But yesterday, as I left you in the street, as I saw how that hurt you, I began to wonder why I had to hide from you." He stopped gesturing and cupped his hand under her chin tenderly. "You opened your heart up to me even though you could've easily lumped me in with all those other men who hurt you in the past. You trusted me. What kind of jerk would I be to not return that trust in kind?"

More tears sprang to Lois' eyes, but she blinked them away, sniffing deeply. He was right — she did trust him, she did let him behind her protective armor. She had always assumed that it was it was his inherent charm and patience that had broken down those defenses, and maybe it was, but now she was beginning to see that he knew a thing or two about hiding himself away from the world, too. Maybe he was able to get inside because he knew how she felt, that he was more like her than she had ever been able to see before. It made her even more grateful that he cared enough to open himself up to her. As she tried to formulate a response, she noticed the song playing on the club's speakers had changed, and suddenly Huey Lewis was singing about the power of love. Her eyes located the speaker, then shifted to Clark's face in time for her to see him react to the new music, appearing almost embarrassed for a moment. A smile spread across her face as she realized that the playlist was probably intentional. "I'm sensing a theme to the music at this place," she said. The humor was back in his expression as he looked at her.

"I plugged the jukebox," he admitted. "I thought it might help to set the mood..."

"It certainly didn't hurt," Lois said. They grinned at each other for a few long moments, the seriousness of the conversation now gone. "I'm beginning to think that there's a hopeless romantic buried deep inside there, Kent," she said patting his chest near the heart. "Tell me, are there any other surprises that you have hidden from me? Something big that I still have to figure out?"

His arm slid around her back again, the twinkle returning to his eye, his head cocked to the side. "Did I mention the flying?" he said softly.

Lois could help but laugh lightly. Being with him, bantering with him, had always been one of her secret pleasures. He brought something out of her that nobody else could. Now that she knew all of him, now that she was in on the secret, it was that much more fun. "I only kiss men who fly," she said, nudging him slightly with her hip. He laughed, too, and she felt herself grow warm. Suddenly, the club felt entirely too impersonal, too public for the things she wanted to say and hear. "Do you want to get out of here, maybe talk somewhere more private?" she asked.

"I would love to," he answered. He downed the remaining contents of his glass and gestured for the door. As they walked out, the intertwined hands remained firmly together. Rather than immediately heading toward Lois's car, though, Clark started for the alley next to the building. She followed silently along, peripherally aware of what he was doing. The alley was deserted, though it was lit from a couple different sources. The dumpsters halfway down the alley hid everything beyond from the street, making it one of the more private places they could go without being behind closed doors.

Once they were beyond the dumpsters, Lois tugged him over next to the wall of the building, leaning against it and disengaging his hand. As he stood in front of her, she reached up and slid his glasses off his face while he watched her, unmoving, as if he had been waiting for her to do it. What was revealed was Superman's face with Clark's hair and wardrobe, an interesting dichotomy that her mind still struggled to believe was real, though she couldn't dispute what her eyes were seeing. "The real you," she said, her voice barely more than a whisper.

He took a deep breath and clenched his jaw, watching her without any shyness or fear, waiting for her reaction. She knew she should feel that giddiness well up inside of her at the fact that she had finally conquered her hero, whose face she only now was able to see clearly. But instead of the instant swoon that she had expected at this sight, she felt a deep tenderness and happiness, and she knew it was reflected in her expression. That seemed to be the response he was looking for, and all of a sudden he seemed to exude raw determination. She held the glasses to him, and he slipped them into his shirt pocket, straightening up as he did.

"The real me wants to fly you into the heavens and let you see the stars the way that they were meant to be seen," he said, his hands reaching up to slowly unbutton his shirt at the top. "The real me wants to take you to the top of a glacier, or the middle of a forest of redwoods, or the edge of a pristine mountain lake, just to show you all the beauty that Earth holds. The real me wants to whisk you off to Paris or Hong Kong or wherever you want to give you a night that you could only dream of." As the first, then second, then third buttons were undone, Lois could see a flash of blue spandex under the shirt and she could feel her eyes go wide. "I want to give you the world, Lois, because..." his voice got soft, but the intensity behind his words stunned her. "Because you are the world to me."

She placed her hand over his, stilling his motion. She brought her other hand up and ran it over the suit, feeling the stitching on the S, the slick coolness of the spandex surrounding it. "Yesterday you promised me a normal night, a walk in the park. Let's start there," she said gently, feeling him relax under her touch. "This... it's going to take some time to get used to." She released his hands and started to button his shirt back up, then looked him in the eyes, feeling humbled at the intensity of emotion that she saw there. "I mean, the partner I knew wasn't a superhero."

"Yes, he was," Clark said softly. "You just didn't realize it."

Once she finished buttoning his shirt, she let her hand linger on his chest. He covered it with one of his own. "That's the thing. I don't know you, do I? Not really, not deep down."

"But you do," Clark answered, moving closer to her. "I'm still the same person. I never misled you about who I am, just the things I can do. And anyway, no matter what I'm wearing or doing or thinking, deep down there's one undeniable fact that will never change: I love you, Lois."

She nodded, her heart threatening to burst out of her chest. It was one thing that he had always had trouble hiding in her presence, either as Clark or Superman. She used to yearn for that affection in the eyes of her hero, and be scared when she saw it in the longing gaze of her friend. But now that it was Clark, just Clark, saying the scary words, regarding her with naked affection, she couldn't turn away, and she couldn't love him more. "I love you, too," she said, the words coming out before she had time to stop them, not that she wanted to stop them. Her reward was a smile that could light a city block. There was no way she could resist that smile, so she kissed him, reveling in the way it made her feel. Maybe, once the newness of the situation wore off, once she was able to stop and examine her history with Clark and his other identity, maybe then she would find things that would make her mad, that Clark would have to explain. Right now, though, being with him, kissing him, felt perfect, and she thought she would give about anything to stay in that moment forever. But it had to end eventually, and after a few delicious moments he pulled away, though the smile remained.

She licked her lips and laughed self-consciously, knowing she had lost control of herself for a few moments. "Come on," she said, patting his chest and pushing away from the wall. "Let's take that walk. I want to hear all your stories, all the ones that you've never told anyone. Then, maybe, we can try out some of your... deluxe features."

"Okay," he said, putting his glasses back on and grasping her hand again as they turned and walked down the alley. He looked almost excited and she wondered how long he had waited to find someone who accepted him, all of him. Lois blinked a few times and pushed away the thought that threatened to bring the tears back again. Better to clear her head and give him her undivided attention, listening, absorbing, and probably teasing. It sounded like heaven.

They entered onto the sidewalk and turned toward Centennial Park, which was a few blocks away. They walked in relative silence for a moment until she became aware of the twist tie on his

finger pressing against her hand. She shifted her grip and fingered it, bringing a sideways glance from him. “So, are you going to keep this thing?” she asked. He shook his head.

“Probably won’t be a good idea for Superman to be seen wearing the same makeshift ring as I am. I mean, it is pretty visible,” he said, and Lois couldn’t disagree. That didn’t mean that she couldn’t be disappointed, though.

“That’s a shame,” she said. “I kinda like the world knowing that my man is taken.”

He smiled crookedly and held up his hand, giving it a good look. “Well if that’s what you want, there are more...traditional ways of showing it.”

Lois laughed incredulously, wondering how the conversation had morphed into marriage jokes. “Let’s just slow that train down for now,” she said. “Though I’m sure Superman flying around with a...traditional ring on would probably cause a little more discussion than a silly twist tie.”

He shrugged and brought the hand down. “At least it would stand out less.” Lois kept her withering stare and he ducked his head and relented. “Okay, staying away from there...for now. But,” he said, the smile returning, “maybe I could give you something instead. Just a little token that shows that we’re going steady.”

“Going steady?” Lois said, trying to sound skeptical, though it couldn’t hide her amusement. She loved the way that the country boy in him seemed to come out at random times, adding to his natural charm. “You are so old fashioned.”

“Not old-fashioned, just hopelessly romantic, remember? Yeah, I could give you my class ring on a nice chain to wear around your neck and show the world that you’re spoken for.”

Lois slowed a little and looked at him. “So, let me get this straight. The most powerful man on Earth wants to give me something to let other guys know that they shouldn’t hit on his girlfriend? Sounds pretty insecure, Clark.”

He gave her a look that he often did when he knew he was being teased, usually before dishing right back at her. His eyes narrowed a little even as he gave a sly smile. “I’m sure you don’t need me to defend your honor,” he said, very sensibly, and she bobbed her head in agreement. She was more than capable of fending off unwanted advances. He was well aware of that, having been on the other end of it before, more than once. “I see it more as a little piece of me that will always be there with you, next to your heart, even when I can’t be. A reminder, I guess, that I will always come back.” His voice was very soft and sincere, and Lois squeezed his hand and leaned in toward him as her heart leapt yet again. The statement was romantic, corny, thoughtful, and sweet, all at the same time. It was so...him. Now all that was missing was the stinger... “Plus, I always thought Smallville looked really great on you,” he said, drawing to mind images of her in a calico dress.

“THAT’S the real you,” she said with certainty, and was rewarded with his best grin, raised eyebrows, and small laugh. She understood now. There might be more to him than she had realized before walking into the Midnight Club, but that didn’t really change much. The core of what made him who he was — the Midwestern values, the sense of humor, the knowledge gained from traveling the world, the talent for putting together a story — those things were still there, augmented by other experiences and abilities. She looked forward to seeing how this new side of him manifested itself and colored the man she knew and loved. “So tell me about the first time you flew,” she said as they walked along the empty sidewalk and into the future.

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### Epilogue

Lois frowned as stood in Perry’s office and listened to Daniel Scardino, DEA agent and walking Hawaiian shirt, spout off about some guy named McCarthy. She should probably be interested in

what he had to say, assuming it was true, but all she could think about was the fact that he had come on to her after tying her and Clark up in Mayson Drake’s office, and how badly she wanted to punch his smug face as he continued to leer at her.

It had been her idea for her and Clark to disguise themselves as janitors and root through the files in Mayson’s office. Clark probably could’ve looked through her office from afar just fine, and probably could’ve found exactly what they needed in a matter of seconds. But he knew she wouldn’t be happy taking a back seat when it came time to do some hands-on investing, so he had played along, bless him, and it had been fun for a few minutes. Then came Mr. Meatball Sandwich. It took some nerve for him to hit on her while she was incapacitated, with Clark there no less. She probably would’ve just chalked him up as another jerk making an ass out himself while he had the perceived advantage and left it at that. But then he had to come into her office, presented himself as a Federal agent, and expected her to play nice.

As he finished talking, Scardino looked at her and flashed what he probably thought was a charming smile. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but are those eyelashes real?”

Lois reached for the class ring that hung from a chain under her shirt. Clark had followed through on his gift to her, and as cheesy as it had seemed at first, she found herself quite attached to it, and to the sentiment that it represented. It made her feel valued, loved, secure, and gave her strength. “I don’t know who you think you are, pal, but you need to back off. I’m taken.”

Across the room, Clark’s eyebrows rose, and she could see a smirk start to form on his face. He probably found the whole situation humorous, and she was sure that she’d join him in having a big laugh about it later, when they were alone. Clark was well aware of what awaited Scardino if he continued down the path he was traveling, but Scardino didn’t seem to know or care, and he just smiled wider at Lois’s words. “Boy, they’re pretty,” he continued, and Lois felt her face become warm. She contemplated grabbing his shirt and roughing him up a little, but assaulting a potential source in Perry’s office probably wouldn’t win her any favors with the boss. Anyway, the direct approach didn’t seem to work with this guy. It was time for a different tactic.

Lois gave Scardino a look of death, then forced herself to calm down, let go of Clark’s ring, and stood a little taller. “Clark, sweetheart,” she said, drawing a look of anticipation from him. “I think we’re done here.”

Clark nodded. As he crossed the room toward her, she reached out and wrapped one arm around his waist, slowing his progress just enough to allow her to snake the other around his neck, pulling him down into a kiss. What had been intended to be a little peck on the lips quickly got out of hand. She peripherally became aware of his hands on her, pulling her closer even as all thought of Scardino or anyone else, for that matter, faded away. After a few moments, she heard Perry clear his throat, and she forced herself to separate from Clark. With a little smile, she glanced at Scardino, who was now properly scandalized, and walked with Clark hand-in-hand from the office. Once the door closed behind them, she heard Clark give a chuckle.

“Glad I could help you take care of that creep,” he said, garnering a sideways glance from her.

“Yeah, my hero,” she said sarcastically.

“If this is what saving you looks like, I think I’ll have to put some more time into the hero gig,” he said.

“That’s assuming that I’m going to need more rescuing from guys like that in the future.”

“Well, why not? I think you’re the perfect woman — smart, beautiful, talented. A guy has to be crazy not to fall instantly in love with you. I’m actually surprised that this kind of thing doesn’t happen more often.”

Lois felt a blush spread across her whole body, and she

couldn't help but squeeze his hand and lean in to him, reveling in how right being with him felt. She let out a contented sigh and looked into his smiling eyes. "Just for that, I think we should get going so you can rescue me a few more times at my place."

Forever.

THE END

He gave a sound that almost seemed like a deep rumbling purr, smiled at her, then changed course to snag his suit coat from his desk chair. She went with, her hand still locked into his. Together they walked past her desk and made for the ramp to the elevators. "Then later maybe I could get some take out," he said. "From... out of town."

"You know, in the interest of full disclosure and all that, maybe you could show me this mysterious take-out location of yours first hand," she said.

"Then, full disclosure, I was kind of hoping that you would ask. What fun is it to do what I can and not show off for my girl every now and then?" he asked, his grin seeping into his words as he gathered her into a hug and entered the elevator. It was all so surreal still, the fact that Clark was Superman, that her hero had been hiding all this time behind her partner's warm façade. But now that she knew, now that there were no more secrets, it was hard to believe that there had ever been a time that she hadn't loved him completely. It was hard to think of him as anything but extraordinary. And he was extraordinary, not just because of all that he could do, through that was certainly part of it. It was the way that he opened up the world to her, the way he opened up himself to her. It was also because of who he was and how he made her feel, and how she knew that her happiness was more important to him than his own.

"Thank you," she said softly, wrapping her free arm around him.

He gave an amused half smile, which only made her want to hug him tighter. "For what?"

"For inviting me to the Midnight Club to meet the real you," she said. "For trusting me with your secret. For letting us experience this."

"What, this?" he said, leaning down and engaging her in a gentle kiss. She laughed lightly as she pulled away.

"I can't imagine what life would be like right now if you hadn't told me. Would I be mad because you leave at inopportune times? Would I be questioning my feelings for you, trying to justify them away just because I was mad at you? Would I have given into that creep Scardino's lines?"

Clark scoffed. "I don't see you falling for some smooth talker wearing THAT shirt."

Lois shrugged. "Magnum P.I. was pretty sexy in a Hawaiian shirt. But that's not my point..."

"We'll never have to find out, will we?" Clark asked. "Anyway, I don't like dwelling on what if scenarios. You know what you know and there's no going back now. You're stuck with me."

"Well, when you put it that way..." she said teasingly. He was right, of course. Dwelling on far-fetched scenarios was a sure way to go crazy. It was best to appreciate what she had, which was better than she could've even believed possible. "I love you, Clark," she said softly.

"And I love you, too. Always," he answered. They looked into each other's eyes wordlessly, until they were interrupted by the tone of the elevator as it arrived at the parking deck. Something mischievous flashed in Clark's eyes, then he quickly leaned down and scooped her up, carrying her out of the elevator and trailing kisses down her neck. The sound of her laughter followed them toward her car. Well, she thought happily, he did promise a night of many rescues and it was off to a roaring start. This wasn't necessarily how she had pictured life with Superman would be like back before she knew who was under the spandex, but she had to admit that this was so much better than those old fantasies. Because unlike her fantasy hero, Clark was real, and he was hers.