

# Long Past Time

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Rating: K+

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**Author's Note:** A birthday fic for rizny, who didn't make it onto my f-list until a few days after her birthday on Jan. 12th! So here's a belated present. ♥ Thanks mark\_clark, van\_el once again. :)

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Clutching Superman's cape to her chest, Lois lifted a hand to rap sharply on the cracked paint of the door to room number 503. There was no answer, so she tried again. Clark hadn't been to work in several days, but he had to be here. She somehow knew he must be. And the reason he hadn't been seen or heard from in all that time? Well, she had a feeling that she knew that answer as well.

She pulled a credit card out of her purse, and with practiced ease, jimmied the lock. As the door opened, she heard Clark feebly protest, "Just a minute...!"

A fire blazed in the hearth on the other side of the room, but other than the intermittent flashing of the red neon sign below his window, there was no other light. Clark sat on the couch, wrapped in an old plaid blanket - he startled when he saw her in the doorway, and he fumbled for his glasses. "Uh... oh, Lois! What are you doing here?"

*Oh, Clark. Haven't we gotten past all of this?* "I knew it..." she sighed.

"No, I just, uh, got a really bad flu," he tried to explain quickly, patting his sweating face with a cloth. "What do you mean you knew it? How'd *you* know?"

Lois closed the door behind her, exasperated. *Why was he continuing to pretend?* "You haven't been in to work, you haven't called the office, you haven't even called *me* back. How could you *not* call *me* back?"

Clark grabbed a glass of water and took a long gulp as an answer. Lois sighed, and slid in beside him, setting her package beside the arm of the couch. "Whatever it is, at least you've got your reasons..." *And I wish you'd share them with me, instead of making me drag them out of you.* "But I knew you were here, you know? Somehow... somehow something pulled me here." Lois looked into his pale, sickly face, willing him to understand the double meaning behind her next words. "I always know when Superman is in trouble."

"S-Super-Superman?" Clark stumbled over the words, barely holding onto his flimsy disguise. "Something happened to Superman?"

"You know, everybody's saying that he's *dead*, but... it can't be true, I just *know* it." She tried to weight her words with just the right amount of pretense. "I feel it in my heart, he... just needs help."

"Well, you know, wherever he is, I'm sure he'll manage."

*And he's managing just fine right now, is he?* she silently fumed. "Well, if he can't..."

manage..." she began, her impulse to simply come out with what she suspected and her need to make him tell her himself fighting inside her mind. He just looked so sick and helpless, so weak... not at all like the Superman she'd always known. "...and if he really *is*... in-in trouble... then there's, uh, there's a few things I'd like to tell him."

Clark stilled, frowning. She hoped he would listen carefully to her next speech. It might make just enough difference. "I'd tell him... that I will always cherish the time we spent together... and I-I never expected anything in return... and no matter how many minutes I saw him for, it always made me happy..." Tears were beginning to well up now - it was long past time to clear the air between them. "And I would tell him... that I love him. And that I'll *always* love him."

Clark's head dropped at her last statement. Was that remorse or weakness... or both?

She pressed on. "And that, whatever happens to the world, I... I know that... he's doing his best to make sure that it'll be all right for the rest of us."

"Wherever he is, Lois, I know that... he would want to thank you." Clark looked into her face with tired eyes that couldn't quite hide his love for her, and gently brushed a tear from her cheek. He patted her hand. "Listen, I'm um, I'm pretty tired, you know, so I think... I'll just rest here for a while, okay? I'll be fine." He nodded shakily. "It's okay. Please."

Lois began to nod and rise, but then stopped. "Clark... you might be fine, but... it's not okay." Reaching beside her for the package, she placed it gently in his lap. "Whatever happens, you're going to need this."

Clark looked down at the folded cape now in his lap and blanched farther. "But this... what... I don't..."

"Clark. Please don't." She squeezed his clammy hand, gazing serenely into his bloodshot eyes behind the unnecessary glasses. "I've kept quiet for years, because I know that's what you wanted. You've always held your duty higher than your personal happiness... and I respect that. But now..."

Lois reached toward his face, and he flinched back, even after it must be completely obvious to him that she knew his secret. But instead of removing his glasses, she pushed back the blanket from his collar. Three bright red scratch marks, a bloody wound from his fight with Nuclear Man, were clearly visible. The skin around the wounds was becoming gray and puckered. "Now we can't afford to pretend anymore. If this is really goodbye... I want to be able to tell you. For real."

Clark winced, but then finally met her gaze without squirming. "You..." Clark coughed, a terrible, rattling sound that pained her inside. "You never deserved this. Even if I-I make it through this, I-"

"Hey," she said firmly. "Stop it. That's not important to me. You get..." She swallowed. "You get through this, and we'll talk again. If not, well..." She leaned over and lightly kissed his lips, colder than they should have been. "I'll never forget what we had," she whispered against his mouth.

Clark started to move his mouth weakly against hers, but she pulled back, the tears starting up again. Then she rose from the couch and fled for the door. As the door opened to the dirty hallway, she could faintly hear him call to her, though the sobs were starting to overtake her. But she couldn't bear to turn back. If he recovered, when he recovered... maybe she would ask him.