

I'll Be Around

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Rated G

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Summary: Superman told Lois two things on the day they met. Only now does she realize what he really meant.

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Disclaimer: This is a work of fanfiction based on 'Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman.' It is written for fun and not for profit. This story uses some dialog from the episode 'Top Copy,' written by John McNamara.

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Everything I ever needed to know about Clark Kent, Superman told me the first day I met him.

"Who are you?"

"A friend."

"How will I find you?"

"I'll be around."

"I'll be around." And he was — he is. He's the reason my coffee is always hot, even after sitting on my desk for two hours. How could I not have noticed that? Did I just assume that on the day Clark Kent became my partner the second law of thermodynamics stopped applying to my coffee cup?

"I'll be around." He's the reason that, after a bad day of work, I reach for the phone instead of the Ivory Tower tape. Or, better yet, just show up on his doorstep. "A friend."

"I'll be around." As in, "I'll be around to catch you when you fall. Even if you were pushed. Even if you jumped." Okay, so it's Superman who swoops in and catches me when I'm pushed by the bad guys. But it's Clark who didn't let me hit the ground when I jumped — of my own stubborn free will and against his advice — into a Lex Luthor free fall. "A friend."

"I'll be around." As in, "I'll be around to watch your back. Even if it means sitting up all night, pretending to read the newspaper on a bench across the street because you won't let me in. Because those really were bullets firing, and, by the way, I caught them. But I couldn't tell you because I wasn't supposed to be Superman then. And no, that wasn't Mr. Traszewski." It's Clark who keeps watch, Clark who holds me while I gasp for breath on the floor. "A friend."

"I'll be around." As in, "I'll be around when a man isn't treating you right. Even if the man is Superman." Only it wasn't. It was a clone. Superman would never bully me like that. But Clark stood up to him. How did I not notice that, either? That Clark Kent could fend off Super-Jerk with one hand? How many times did he do that — risk giving himself away by using his strength in front of me? I'm sure it never crossed his mind at the time. He was too busy thinking of me. Problem is, so was I.

"I'll be around." As in, "And if I can't dance with you the way I want to, because a certain blonde attorney keeps butting her nose in where it isn't wanted, then I'll dance with you any way I can. Even if I have to do it in a cape instead of a tux." But Superman can't be my friend. Not really. Not like Clark.

"I'll be around." As in "Even if it's Christmas Eve and I'm supposed to be in Smallville."

"I'll be around." Superman meant that he'd be around for all of us. For the whole world. Even if it meant putting his own life

on the line to tackle an asteroid. No wonder Superman was missing in action. He was knocked silly and trying to remember who he was.

But Clark means that he wants to be around me, specifically. Enough so that he went out on a limb to ask me out, even though I'd already handed his heart back to him on a platter mere months before. And he doesn't complain when our date gets cancelled in favor of a long stakeout and bad Chinese food. He looks after me better than my own mother would. "A friend."

Everything I needed to know about Clark Kent, Superman told me that first day. And it was true. And that's why now, when he's putting it all on the line again, it's my turn. To be a friend. To be around. To stifle the impulse to withdraw, the impulse to accuse. Because he didn't tell me. But I'm going to tell him. And here's my chance.

"Working late?"

"Big news night. Where've you been?"

"Superman captured Diana. I got us the exclusive." How many times has he done that? Told the truth, but implied the lie? But no, I'm not going the Mad Dog route. Not this time.

"You're some partner." I smile because it's true.

"Is that all I am, Lois?" Here it is. The point of no return. Last chance to keep my secret. He's certainly kept his long enough. But where would that get us? Nowhere I'm interested in going. So here goes the jump. I hope the water's deep enough.

"No. You're not just a partner." He's looking hopeful. He doesn't know yet. I take one of his hands in mine and lead him away from the front doors. Perry and Jimmy were right behind me when I left the bullpen and I really don't want to bump into them right now. He follows easily. Once I've found us a quiet spot, I turn to face him again.

"You're not just my partner, Clark," I repeat, "You're everything you told me you were the day you first flew me through that window." I give a little nod toward the Planet's façade. He's turning white. He gets it now.

"What did I tell you?" His voice is a dry whisper, like brown leaves blown down the sidewalk.

I smile again to show I'm not mad.

"You told me you were a friend. And that you'd be around." I take his face in both my hands, partly just to touch him, partly to make sure he's looking at me. He doesn't seem like he wants to look at me.

"You were right, Clark. I never realized how right until tonight. You're the best friend I've ever had. And you've been here for me from day one. And I don't mean when you're wearing garish colors. Except on your tie." I give him a teasing little smile. But he's not ready for teasing yet. I let out a little sigh. "I'm sorry, Clark." He's frowning now. I've confused him.

"You're sorry? For what? I thought you'd be furious." I slide my hands down to his shoulders. If I let go altogether, he might bolt. He looks wretched.

"I'm sorry for whatever I did to make you feel like you still had to hide from me. That you couldn't show me all of who you are."

"I did show you all of me, Lois. Just not all at once." He's looking a little better. Like maybe the worst has happened and it isn't as bad as he'd feared.

"I should have told you myself." He's in full apology mode now. "I wanted to. I was just... afraid." I don't ask him what he was afraid of. He was afraid that I would do what I almost did. What anyone who knows me would predict I would do: defend my hurt feelings with anger. Why I didn't is beyond me. Except that I remembered. I remembered who he is and what he's done for me.

"I know. But you don't have to be afraid of me." He raises a skeptical eyebrow at me. I think I see one corner of his mouth give a little twitch.

“Really!” Why am I now the one defending myself? Because he’s Clark Kent, that’s why. The man can tease me into or out of any mood, and he’s the only one who can.

“I mean, jeez, Clark, I’ve been mad at you before. It’s not like you can’t take it.” That gets an actual laugh. But, as quickly as it came, the mirth is gone again. His eyes are wide and this time he looks truly terrified.

“What, Clark? What’s wrong?”

“It didn’t work. The hologram. I thought everyone bought it; Perry printed the hoax headline and everything. But if it was that obvious...” Wait a minute, now he *is* going to make me mad.

“Clark Jerome Kent!” I’m punctuating my speech by jabbing my index finger into his chest, right where that big, fat, yellow S belongs. “Just because it didn’t work on me doesn’t mean it didn’t work on everybody else! You’re forgetting who you’re dealing with here!”

He catches my hand before I can land my final jab. “Never, Lois.” How can he make that one phrase sound like a caress?

He’s holding my captured hand to his chest now. “How did you figure it out then, seeing that it wasn’t so obvious and it fooled everyone else?”

“Simple.” I retrieve my hand and give him my best superior smirk. “The very thing that convinced everyone else was the thing that gave you away to me.” He just stares. He doesn’t get it yet.

“I’d never seen the two of you together before. As soon as I did, I saw it. Superman has your eyes, your nose, your jaw, even your little freckle on your lip. All he doesn’t have is your glasses and your expressions. Most of them, anyway. But, Clark, I know you better than anyone in Metropolis. I’ve seen you mad and I’ve seen you serious. Superman never looks like Clark Kent; you don’t ever let him relax enough to. But sometimes Clark Kent looks a little like Superman. Which only someone who pays a lot of attention to Clark Kent would notice.”

“You’re amazing.” There it is: the Clark Kent high-voltage grin.

“I know.” I grin back. And maybe that’s part of why I forgive him. I do feel pretty good that I figured it out when everyone else was fooled.

“What now, Lois? Where do we go from here?” We’re back to where he started tonight. What is he to me? What do I want to be to him?

“Can I make a suggestion?” I ask.

“Please.”

“Well, let’s finish what we started. Let’s go on a real date, no stakeout, no Ralph’s Pagoda, then, take it from there.”

“A real date, huh? You mean one where I shave after work and put on my best cologne — the one I bought in Paris — and hope for a goodnight kiss at your door afterward?” Oh, yeah, he’s feeling better now.

“Yeah. That’s exactly what I mean. Now, come on; walk me home.”

As we start out down the dark street, arm in arm, he teases, “Do I have to wait for that date before I get the kiss?”

“Don’t push your luck, flyboy.” But don’t order garlic, either.

THE END