

Time After Time p1 - Need You Now

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Rating: K+

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It was only on the fifth time she'd crossed the room before she had actually picked up the phone and only the third time she had dialed before she made herself wait until the answering machine came on.

After a brief hesitation, she spoke at the beep and didn't even try to pretend that she didn't know what was happening. "Hello, you. I saw what happened on the news. Good to know you're alive and well. Give me a call if you have five minutes to spare. Maybe I'll see you later." So many other things were on the tip of her tongue to say, but she didn't trust them to be said over a phone. Especially not when she was so torn over how to feel about the last day or so. And the fact that she'd barely slept last night might lead to a slip.

After the way she had found him in his apartment, so pale and shivering from sickness, she at least rated a phone call. Nothing she had ever seen had prepared her for seeing him like that. Beaten, she could deal with, had dealt with. But you couldn't defend someone like him from their immune system. From the information Perry and the others could glean from eyewitnesses, it sounded as if this Nuclear Man had kryptonite of a fashion. No wonder he had looked so worse for the wear. Nothing she had been witness to in their long association had scared her as badly as seeing him last night had. Maybe that was what had prompted the confession she'd never planned to give.

There had been no consideration for his reaction, just the spontaneous need to try to give him a reason to keep going. It was almost a blessing that he had fobbed it off the way he had. As much as it hurt her to hear, it was better to keep herself guarded. And at least he knew, knew that someone knew him and cared for him beyond the public façade. No matter how he was starting to feel about Lacey, she had the past and she'd keep it. She'd made her decision years ago, same as he had made his that he couldn't stay with her. She'd keep his secret if it meant that that was all she could keep of him. The thought misted her eyes, bothering her more than she cared to admit.

With a heavy sigh, she put the phone back in the cradle and went to pick up her purse. He wasn't going to call her back immediately; she knew that from experience. No point in staying here and driving herself crazy with anxiety, anyway. Everyone knew that the *Planet* would be the first with the information on Superman's condition and whereabouts. Better to be there than here alone, regardless of the fact that she'd quit just yesterday. Staying away would only drive her crazy. Better to use all this pent-up emotion toward something useful. Especially since Perry had revealed a plan to give Warfield a comeuppance this morning.

Superman never needed a calendar to keep track of his appointments as long as most of his friends were reporters. Lois had left a message on his answering machine, and Perry had called him as well, the Editor in Chief typically gruff as he barked orders for Kent to get down to Superman's press conference.

As he headed to the conference, Clark mulled over the events of the past few days. Lois had shown herself to be a true friend and partner - not that he was surprised by that. But he'd thought he was the only one who remembered how she'd stood by him the last time.

Now it seemed as though he might not be. When he was drowning in illness and shame at his defeat, Lois had come to him. She'd brought him his cape, but more importantly, she'd brought him hope: the thing she claimed he always represented to her. And from the way she'd spoken during that conversation, the looks she'd given him, she knew.

She still knew his identity. Which meant, more than likely, she remembered everything. The second kiss, after their flight together when she'd admitted that she knew, hadn't worked. She also knew, then, that he'd tried to erase her memory again after that flight.

And yet she was *still* defending him, still encouraging him, still doing everything in her power to help him. Lois had every right to hate him, Clark supposed, but her actions spoke of enduring love. He even suspected that she had only pretended the amnesia kiss worked the second time, letting him believe his secret was safely hidden.

Well, it *was* safe. With her. He had never asked Lois to prove her loyalty, but she had done it unasked, and proven a thousand times over that he could trust her.

Not to mention the fact that they were in love. That was swiftly becoming undeniable. His heart skipped a little just thinking those words. If he loved her, he would put her in danger. If he loved her, he would jeopardize his mission. The only problem was, the 'if' had gone out of that statement a long time ago. If his heart was a compass, then Lois was a powerful magnet, and the flattery of women like Lacey Warfield was utterly in vain.

With so much on his mind, it was no trouble to slip into the slightly befuddled guise everyone expected of Clark Kent as he arrived at the press conference.

Lois and Jimmy were already there on mall outside the U.N., both grinning and riding high on Perry's victory over Warfield. The gamble to purchase the *Planet* had paid off in spades. With all of the outstanding shares now under the editor's control, there was very little possibility of a shareholder attempting to take the paper from them again.

Lois, in particular, was beaming to beat the band. The confrontation with the millionaire only a short time before had improved her mood significantly and watching Perry reinstated as acting chief had been the cherry on top. Hazel eyes still alight, she and Jimmy were still recounting the mystified look on the old tycoon's face when the boom had been lowered when Clark walked up. Lois had just raised her eyes skywards as he walked up.

It made him smile to see Lois restored to her usual vivacity. She was normally so animated, so full of life, that watching her spark ebb over the past days was heartbreaking. Now, of course, Lois was full of vim and vinegar again, ready to take on anyone. Clark made sure to slouch a bit, as always, as he said, "Hi, everybody. Am I late?"

Jim grinned a welcome, nudging Lois, who glanced over at him with wide eyes. "Hey, Mr. Kent. How you doing? No, he's not here yet."

Seeing him standing there in front of them was a surge of pure relief. All of the turmoil, or at least a significant portion of it, drained away just to see him grinning that goofy smile at her. He was alive, in one piece, and the glow of health had replaced that awful pallor. Regardless of how things went forward after this, her heart ached with gratitude. Almost nearly back to

normal. The question was, did she want it to stay that way. Realizing that she was giving herself away, her smile grew to her usual impish one. Best to feel her way along without him alerting him to it. Act normal. Well, normal for her. "Well, it must have been quite some effort to *drag* yourself out of bed this morning."

"Well, I'm feeling a lot better. I had a visit from a pretty good nurse." Clark returned Lois' smile, trying to let his deep gratitude show. At the same time, he had to keep up appearances so that Jimmy wouldn't catch on. Why was it always Jimmy who managed to come between them?

"Oh." Lois responded again without looking at him, a study of nonchalance on the surface as if she had no idea what he was talking about. However, under the surface, her heart was racing. This was the closest they had come in the last few years to admitting the past. Then again, he could just be playing Clark's usual brand of cute. Only one way to find out.

Jimmy cut in, his glance flicking from one reporter to the other. It seemed the photographer had sensed something amiss in spite of both of their best efforts to keep him out of the loop. Looking a trifle confused, Jim looked at him seriously. "Well, it must have been some pretty good medicine because Ms. Lane said you were really ill."

Exactly how far did he want to pursue this? Clark hesitated minutely. He wasn't completely sure that Lois had caught his meaning. Her casual façade had always been difficult to see past. He decided to make the leap. In an almost conspiratorial tone, he told the photographer, "Well, you know, Jimmy. Sometimes all you need is a little loving attention from the right person."

Clark saw her laugh to herself then, that unreserved smile peeking out again. And that's how he knew. She had that secretive, knowing look when she said it, and her voice was warm with affection when she murmured, "I'm glad you're back, Clark." Behind her, Lois could feel Jimmy's eyes dart back and forth between them, realizing that she had to have had a hand in this. And she didn't need to see his face to know he was smiling. The kid had always rooted for Clark getting the girl. That this made him happy was no surprise, even if he didn't know the reality of the situation.

It was all she could do to rein in the storm of emotions whirling inside her. The need to speak to him about this finally was enormous, but it just wasn't feasible at the moment. And neither had the slightest clue what the fallout might be. Which made the inability to speak freely both better and worse.

There was a beat, and then the façade was back in place, all too aware of the place and the time. Time. That made her glance quickly as her watch. He would need to making a caped appearance soon. If Fate was kind, maybe there would be time to discuss revelations later. Knowing what she had to do, Lois snapped to and reminded him of the way of things. "And, uh, remember. I'm covering Superman's press conference. All you do is tape reactions from the crowd, okay?"

A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. She heard him loud and clear - and her own feelings for him were obvious as the warmth in her voice. Oh yes, they needed to have a discussion about everything that had happened. And this time, he wouldn't be so foolish as to try and erase her memories again. Even now, he wondered just when she had remembered and how that affected the events of the last years. The implications were huge.

Continuing to prove why he needed her, Lois had just handed him the perfect opening to make his exit while he was lost in thought. Making a show of patting his pockets, Clark scowled. "Reactions, right. Oh dear. I guess I need a tape recorder. I'll be right back."

"Clark..." Playing along the way she had been for so long already, she made sure the disbelief was clear on her face before she started laughing. The amusement was real, amazement in what was happening here causing it to bubble up like champagne. Lois didn't know what exactly she'd been expecting when she had picked up the phone this morning, but she had never even hoped for this. She'd been playing into his actions and reactions for three years now. The possibility of letting this secret go was like having a weight torn abruptly from her back. She just had to figure out how to get her balance again.

Jimmy laughed, too, but for entirely different reasons. Whatever was going on hadn't disturbed the order of the universe enough that Clark could actually be prepared for once. He shook his head in amusement, glancing at Lois in time to catch her relieved smile. "Same old Mr. Kent. He'll never change," the photographer chuckled.

"I hope not." Lois was shaking her head as she watched Clark go, still snickering. After watching his exits for the last little while, she was starting to understand the way he planned things. Like as not, he'd go around the huge building and duck into a place in the shadows to speed up and blur into uniform with about a minute to spare before he had to...

The wind picked up then, and seconds later the crowd began to cheer, proving Lois' assumptions correct. Superman soared in, landing just across from Lois and Jimmy. He spoke to the photographer first. "Hey, Jimmy."

At the same moment, Olsen was asking with a broad grin on his face, "How you doin', Superman?" The answer was self-evident in Superman's smile and nod.

Then the hero turned his attention to his chronicler. Their eyes met, all of the unspoken knowledge hovering between them. She knew; it was right there in the way she watched him. There was so much he wanted to say to her... and so much he couldn't say here, of all places. For now, he would have to settle for the obvious, and hope that the warmth in his voice let her know the depth of his feelings. "Lois, good to see you again."

She couldn't help herself; despite all the nervousness she felt in not knowing the specifics of what he thought of all this, Lois could feel the love-struck smile she could never quite hide around him in uniform making a very obvious appearance. The same way it always had. "Good to see you, too," she murmured, looking him square in the eye. The only question was, was this just his public face, were both of them his public faces toward her, or could she trust his expression? Caught between anxiety and elation, the reporter tried to read him.

Unfortunately, his eyes gave away nothing. The crowd around them was watching too closely for him to let his relief and adoration show. He was close enough to touch her, to enfold her in his arms, but this was neither the time nor the place. All he could do was return the smile before heading up to the podium to speak.

But it seemed that wasn't quite all he'd done. Just before he stepped away, Lois felt something tickle the palm of her hand. She looked at it, surprised to find a piece of paper that hadn't been there a moment ago. He must have used a touch of super-speed to slip it into her hand just then. Lois unfolded it to see his familiar script in a simple message: Meet me on the balcony afterward? He'd signed it - as if he needed to - the same way he'd signed the first note, A Friend.

Her wide eyes immediately went to his before she could lower the throttle. They were going to talk about it. Finally. Knowing he couldn't register it beyond a possible smile, Lois caught his eye and nodded slowly, Jimmy thinking she was doing so in approval. Again that wild mix of emotions at maybe getting this out in the open between them. Regardless of the final result of the meeting, at least they would both be on the same page. That is if he could

resist the urge to drag out the Rohypnol kiss again, she thought dryly. With that in mind, she made herself listening to his words now instead of puzzling out what he might say later.

"One side of me just wants to tell you that you made your bed, now lie in it. It was your choice to stay or go and you not only locked the door and threw away the key, you made me forget the door was even there." Her voice was tight, but Lois didn't yell. It was clear, however, that she was fighting her emotions.

"And the other side?" He asked this clearly, watching her face with a feeling of trepidation that was palpable.

She looked at him for a long moment, her expression resigned and distrustful as she looked him in the eye. "The other part can't stand me for the fact that you broke it off so easily and I kept my mouth shut and just dealt with it. Your 'memory kiss' or whatever didn't work on me and I just kept a lid on everything I knew, and felt, rather than confront you and have the last piece of you and I together taken away *again*. That and it totally resents that fact that something in me died when I thought he'd killed you. That's how the other half of me feels."

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