

I Sense That I Love You 5: Fifth Taste's the Charm

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Rated G

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Summary: Lois and Clark each consider the tastes that are most important to them.

A/N: Thanks to Déjà Vu for all her help and encouragement with my writing!

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LOIS:

I'm not a big donut fan, to tell you the truth. I much prefer a cup of coffee or a Double Fudge Crunch bar, but that day, when Clark had smiled at me, broken his donut in half, and given me a piece, I didn't complain. I didn't tell him that he should keep it since he likes them so much better than I do. I didn't think about the extra hour I'd have to spend at the gym if he started making a habit of it. No, I took the donut, and I bit into it.

It was a cinnamon cake donut, which, again, isn't even my favorite type of donut. And yet... there was something about this one that made it seem richer and fuller and tastier than any I had ever eaten before. Maybe it was the conversation — trying to find a time both Clark and I had free to go on our first date, which had already been delayed an interminable amount of time. Maybe it was the look in his eyes as he handed the piece to me, giving over what was his just as he always did.

The cinnamon had barely registered on my tongue; the texture of the cake scarcely mattered. What mattered was that Clark had touched it. Clark had given it to me without even being asked. And as I ate the donut, I realized that that's just the way Clark is.

And yet there I was, sitting on his desk, pretending to look for a feasible date when really I wasn't willing to give over my fear and *make* time for him. And I was eating his donut.

Of course, there are always consequences for kindness. I think the official saying is "No good deed goes unpunished." If anyone knows the truth of that, it must surely be Clark, AKA Superman. He always puts the needs of everyone else above his own, and sometimes — a great deal of the time, in fact — it backfires on him. You see, the world just isn't set up that way; it doesn't make allowances for someone like Clark, who's willing to suffer for others, willing to endure anything so long as it makes others happy. So it ends up devouring Clark's sacrifices and spitting them out again, as if to punish him for his audacity in daring to think he can change the order of things.

This time, the consequences were relatively painless. Perry was angry with him for stealing the last donut. With the taste of Clark's selflessness still in my mouth, I tried to cover for him — not very convincingly, I know, but at least I tried. It certainly wouldn't be the last time I covered for Clark, and I got much better at it as I grew to know him — and myself — better.

So, no, I'm not a big donut fan. But I don't have to appreciate

donuts to appreciate the fact that Clark will always put me first. It's a truth that never changes, and it's a truth I remember every time I catch a taste of cinnamon.

Chocolate is definitely my thing. I don't even remember when I first discovered the allure of the rich, smooth taste; it was probably before I could walk. So, for almost the whole of my life, I knew that the taste of chocolate could soothe a great many woes.

Or enhance an already good moment.

Like the moment when Clark recognized my not-too-subtle hints, laughed at himself, and fed me a taste of the chocolate dessert on his plate. It was a tiny bite, little more than crumbs, and yet it was hypnotic. Much more so than any chocolate I had ever tasted before.

There was something about the fact that Clark had fed it to me, the feeling of his eyes locked on me, the echoes of his laughter, that made it a thousand times more powerful. Suddenly, it was all I could do to stay upright, as if the taste of chocolate — a taste I had encountered more times than I'd like to count — had metamorphosed into something so much stronger than I could handle, something that swept through me and changed the way I saw things, something that made everything seem at once so much clearer and so much more confusing.

I don't know why I was surprised by that transformation. From the moment Clark entered my life, he'd been quietly changing everything for the better.

My work, which had once been the sole purpose of my life, had become fun and engrossing and new, but it was hardly the center of my world anymore.

Friends, before a thing of the past that often came back to haunt me, had become something that grew to encompass much of my life — Perry and Jimmy and several others at the Daily Planet, but mostly just Clark, my best friend.

And then there were the activities that took place when I wasn't working — there hadn't been any of those before Clark entered my life. Well, not unless I was forced to admit to the soap operas and romance novels. But after Clark... suddenly, there was a large variety of things to do. We watched movies, played board games — I'm serious, board games! — posed trivia questions to each other, got together for pizza and conversation, and just generally enjoyed each other's company.

Then Clark asked me out on a date.

Sure, I had entertained the notion that I might care for Clark as more than just a friend before, but I had never had to act on it. Until suddenly he was asking, and no matter how scared I was of losing all the great things he had brought into my life, I couldn't say no. Abruptly, everything changed. I felt it almost like a physical sensation on our almost-first date, but it clicked fully and terrifyingly into place as I confided secrets to him and begged for a taste of his chocolate dessert.

It was as if I had never seen him before, never realized exactly what was sitting across from me, never understood just how much he could give me. With the taste of chocolate dissolving in my mouth, I stared at Clark as if for the first time, cataloguing every fact about him, running through a thousand memories of him in my head, and coming up with the shocking and terrifying conclusion that I could keep everything he had been to me and yet have him as more.

Chocolate was my guilty pleasure, one that I craved and enjoyed yet resented when I stepped onto the scales. But Clark... Clark could be mine, if I chose, and I realized then that if I made that choice, I would never regret it.

So of course I panicked. I slammed the door on Clark's hopeful, patient expression, and I kicked my shoes off, and I went straight for the ice cream in the freezer. Everything else in my life

might have changed, but ice cream was a constant. It had been there for me after a long evening of putting my drunken mother to bed and helping Lucy get her homework done. It had been there for me during all the late nights studying to pass my classes and qualify for the scholarship I needed in order to afford my apartment. It had been there for me when Claude had thrown me away as soon as he got what he wanted. It had been there for me when both Clark and Superman confused me the most.

But nothing about the creamy dessert was comforting that night. It couldn't chase away the knowledge that I had just made what was probably the stupidest mistake of my entire life — and there had been quite a few of those, most of them starting with the word "Lex." Nothing about the cold feel of sugar melting on my tongue could wash away the sharp remorse eating me alive just as surely as I was consuming the ice cream.

The truth of the matter — the truth that was turning the ice cream in my mouth into ashes — was that this wasn't the first time I had done this to Clark. In fact, this was pretty much par for the course since the first day I had met him. Sure, he hadn't always said the right things, and sometimes his sense of humor was... well, different... but through it all, he had been there for me.

I had shielded my heart to keep anyone from being able to hurt me again, but in doing so, I had become the one that hurt others. I had done to Clark something very similar to what Claude had done to me — led him on and then slammed the door in his face when I was done.

Not my proudest moment, and the fact that I was shoveling spoonfuls of ice cream into my mouth only attested to that fact. I'm so brave in my professional life, but in my personal life, I know better than anyone that I'm a coward.

So there I was, sitting alone and eating ice cream when I could have been with Clark. Story of my life. Dating Lex when I could have listened to Clark. Throwing myself at Superman when I could have been spending time with Clark. Spending hours working on stories that were forgotten as soon as the Kerth Awards were over when I could have been having fun with Clark.

But up until that night, I don't think I had realized just exactly how much Clark could — and had — come to mean to me. I had known looking into the mirror before my almost-wedding that I could love Clark. I had known when confessing to his sleeping form that I loved him as more than a brother that I did love Clark in a way I couldn't really explain.

But only then, eating ice cream straight from the carton and shivering — not from the cold, but out of regret — did I realize that I could love Clark in a way I had thought existed only in fairy tales. I could love him with all of my being, with all of my soul.

Ice cream didn't help me feel better. But it did help bring clarity to my heart.

The taste of bitterness is harder to stomach than any dessert. Watching Clark walk away with Mayson to enjoy an intimate lunch with her — knowing that I had been the one to send him on his reluctant way — all I could taste was bitterness and regret. Clark had tried to make things right, but I had cut him off and shoved him away, even going so far as to push him into the arms of a woman I severely disliked.

And I? I would sit alone at my desk and go hungry, regardless of the fact that if I had kept my mouth shut, I would have probably been spending the hour talking to Clark over a delicious meal that he would refuse to tell me where he had found.

The fact that I got a tip that led Jimmy and me to a road where we were duped into tricking Superman... well, that was just more regret to throw on top of everything else.

At the time, however, there was one moment when I was immeasurably pleased, when the bitterness was submerged

beneath triumph.

Because Clark, in the middle of a private lunch with a woman who obviously liked him a great deal, came running the instant I called him. He dropped everything, did exactly as I said, and was there for me. The fact that it turned out to be a set-up was immaterial next to the realization that Clark would *always* put me first.

That memory came back to me later, after I discovered that Clark and Superman are one and the same. You see, almost every single day, Clark hears cries for help, and he looks to me with that distracted, meaningful glance. And almost every single day, I smile at him and I nod and I tell him to go. And almost every single day, he leaves me — for a few minutes, for an hour, sometimes for a few days altogether if the disaster's big enough.

But I know: if I call, he'll come. If I say his name, he'll be there. He's proven that fact over and over again, so many times that it's even more irrefutable than gravity. Lois Lane calls; Superman answers.

And even if I don't call him, Clark Kent will always return to me.

It was hard to see that back then with the taste of bitterness in my mouth — hard to realize that no matter how many times Clark ducked out, he'd always come back. No matter how many times I pushed him away, he'd always be there waiting for me to look over my shoulder and find him watching out for me.

So, yes, bitterness is hard to swallow. But it's not impossible, not when Clark is there to turn it into triumph.

The other tastes I've described... forget them. They don't really mean anything compared to the last — the best. They were all just leading up to the final course, the single taste that now encompasses the whole of my life.

Walking down that brightly lit street with Clark at my side, thinking of how much I had almost lost, reeling with disbelief that he was giving me another chance... I should have known it was coming. I did, actually, but no amount of preparation could have prepared me for the actuality of the event.

Clark and I had kissed before — a handful of times, in fact. Several times, it had been to distract the people around us, something I didn't exactly make a habit of doing with co-workers and something that always, with Clark, took me unexpectedly aback; once had been a sad goodbye kiss that had scarcely registered next to the terrible fact that Clark was walking away from me. Later, after combining the two most important men in my life into one, I was able to realize that I had kissed him a few more times, once in a moment of weakness he had faked — and I hadn't — and once just before he had flown alone into the vastness of space to single-handedly knock aside an asteroid the size of a small town.

But at that moment, looking up at Clark as he murmured something about doors and leaned nearer to me, I couldn't grab hold of those memories to prepare me for what I was about to experience. They slipped away from me and then, with the suddenness of lips meeting, were simultaneously obliterated and enhanced by the taste of his kiss.

One sip was enough to rock me back on the heels of my feet but wasn't enough to satisfy me. I needed more, and he supplied it, his hands rising to cup my face and tilt my head toward him. Whatever expression was on his face, I couldn't see. I couldn't open my eyes, couldn't think past the explosion of flavor that consumed me.

No matter what happened afterwards, the memory of that single taste never left me. It was there all through the long weeks after Mayson's death and Daniel Scardino's intrusion into our lives; it was there even while I struggled to come to terms with the fact that Clark and Superman were one and the same.

And the thing is — the thing that struck me the most is that

Clark's taste never changes. It's as steady as he is, as unwavering as his love for me, as fixed as the fact that he will always come when I call. The world may change — it may explode around us and come crashing down — but Clark is always there for me, always the same, always that taste that wipes away tears and births happiness and joy.

I love the way Clark kisses me. It's a gesture he makes with his entire body, as his love is given with the whole of his being. There is always an undertone of awe in the way he touches me, as if even to this day, he can't quite believe this is real, that I'm his to freely hold and kiss. But when he takes me fully into his arms and uses one hand to caress my shoulder or cheek or hair, granting me more of that life-sustaining taste, *I* know that it is real, for it's far too amazing to be a dream.

He makes me feel cherished, beautiful, desirable, and safe — as if all of those things can exist together, can merge into one as never before. He makes me feel as if I am enough all on my own — no need of straight A's on my report card or the perfect job and salary or a closetful of Kerth Awards. As if I am exceptional and extraordinary just as I am — no need to change my habits or alter my quirks or quit my career. As if I am more than he — a super man in every way — deserves.

He makes me feel loved.

And that taste — the essence of all that, more than anything — is the anchor and center of my world. My refuge, my comfort, the very air I breathe.

Clark Kent *is* my world.

And every time he kisses me, he lets me know that I am his as well.

That taste... what can I say? It's almost as extraordinary as he is.

CLARK:

Chinese had never tasted so good. I mean, I had frequented the same restaurant several times — I wouldn't have dared to feed it to the great Lois Lane if I hadn't known it was good — but never before had it tasted like this.

It was silly, I knew, to think that way. I had already realized that I had a crush on the woman I was working with — the woman who didn't think much of me — and I knew, intellectually, that I was attributing my delight with Lois to the improved flavor of the food. It didn't actually taste better just because I took a bite at the same moment as Lois. It didn't actually satisfy me more just because Lois smiled and laughed during this impromptu dinner. It didn't actually melt in my mouth just because she responded politely, even charmingly, to my own words.

I knew that... but I couldn't quite believe it.

The flavors were richer, the textures more extreme, the combinations more appetizing, as if the entire meal had been made over into something even greater. Even the fortune cookies were filled with a hidden tang.

The only jarring moment was when Lois let me know that she was not feeling the same things. She might have said the food was delicious — and even meant it — but it was clear that the seasoning of her food had nothing whatsoever to do with me or my company.

It didn't matter. I knew without ever tasting another bite that this meal had changed something for me. It had made me realize just how much I was missing in all the other meals I ate. It had made it impossible for me to fully enjoy any meal where Lois wasn't there to season the dishes with her observations and questions and smiles.

Going abroad for a good meal wasn't something I had thought of just for Lois; I had brought foreign foods home to my parents before. They often enjoyed the foods I brought, particularly my mom, who claimed that it was the only way she

could get a night off from cooking. I always loved eating with them — whether it was home-cooked meals or the takeout I brought with me. Their conversation, their company, their easy acceptance and love of me... sometimes it was all I had to cling to, the only lifeline that existed for me.

But eating that first dinner with Lois... I realized that she could be my lifeline, too. She could be the person that *I* could take care of and help and comfort and understand. She was so beautiful, but locked away, hidden behind her mask, shielding her true self from rejection... just as I was.

And I knew — I knew that I wanted to flavor her meals just as she flavored mine.

It wasn't an easy road, of course. Lois was locked tightly behind her disguise, reluctant to let anyone in. She had on a shell a mile thick, and I didn't want to push her. I didn't want to remake her; I just wanted her to trust me — to be *able* to trust me. She was a mass of contradictions that made perfect sense to me, maybe because I was hiding behind my own shell. Empathy, understanding, compassion, or just love — whatever the reason for it, I saw her for who she really was, and I loved her for it.

I loved her perfections and her flaws equally.

I loved the fact that she wasn't lying when she said she was capable of winning a Pulitzer before she was thirty.

I loved the fact that she couldn't cook to save her life.

The day she made oatmeal for her sister during a failed counseling session and made me eat a bowl of it, I learned that I *could* stomach just about anything. The bomb on the first day I was Superman had been easier to consume than the lumpy, somewhat tasteless gruel she watched me eat with that challenging quirk of her eyebrow, but I ate every bite of it. I ate it because she had made it, because she had given it to me, and because it was worth it.

I knew what the people in the newsroom said. I knew that the entire city of Metropolis knew Clark Kent was in love with Lois. I knew they all felt sorry for me, wondering how long I'd trail along after Lois Lane like a puppy dog, how long I'd take her constant put-downs and barbs and apathy. I knew they had running bets on when I'd walk away in defeat with my tail between my legs. I knew they made fun of me and condemned Lois simultaneously.

But they didn't understand. All they saw were the lumps in that oatmeal. They didn't see that there was so much more there. They didn't see the brilliance that allowed her to make that oatmeal for her sister even though she knew she wasn't good at it. They didn't understand the loyalty she was capable of that prompted her to make the effort. They were blind to the deep vulnerability she felt about her own shortcomings and flaws and to the beauty that shone through despite the walls she had built up around herself.

They didn't see her like I did. Sure, there were days when the put-downs and barbs and seeming apathy hurt — a lot — but there were other days when I received so much more than I deserved, so much more than they would ever think she had to give.

And Lois was never indifferent to me. No matter what she had said at the end of that first meal, there had been a moment even then when she looked at me as if there were something more there than she had originally thought. And almost every day, there was always at least one moment when I knew that she *did* see me, that I *did* mean something to her... that I was, in some small way, flavoring her life, too.

And then it wasn't her sister she was cooking for — it was me. I'll never forget the surprise I felt when she fed me a piece of rumaki and asked if she was yesterday's news. I think I choked more on the realization that she had dared to cook for me than on

the extreme amount of curry.

You see, Lois doesn't cook for anyone. It's almost a point of pride with her that she doesn't spend time in the kitchen. If she doesn't like you... well, you get zilch. If she likes you, she'll order some takeout. It's only the people she *really* cares about — the people she considers the closest to her — that she'll cook for.

And she had cooked for me.

Since Mayson's death, I had been living in a daze, scarcely able to see anything besides the investigation, fighting in some small way to make up for the fact that I had, in the end, been someone Mayson absolutely hated and feared. Fighting to atone for the fact that my fierce desire for a personal life had made me too late to save her.

The eye-watering amount of spice in the hors d'oeuvre was startling. Lois's question was astonishing. The realization that she had gone to so much trouble for me was... incomprehensible.

She was trying.

She was worried.

She... cared. She cared whether what was between us succeeded or failed. She wanted it to work. At some unknown time — I couldn't begin to say when — her reluctance to date me had transformed into *wanting* to date me.

But Mayson had died with the knowledge that the man she had thought she could have a relationship with was actually an alien she had despised and distrusted. I couldn't stand for Lois to look at me with the same expression of disillusionment, disappointment, and horror that Mayson had worn in the moment before her death. If I ever saw that look on Lois's face, I would shrivel up inside. I would fade away. Clark wouldn't be able to face life anymore and Superman would be all that remained, all that was left when the pretense of humanity was ripped away.

But how could I *not* tell her and not hurt her? How could I *tell* her and not hurt her? How could I know just how far she cared for me?

'Oh, what tangled webs we weave when first we practice to deceive,' I remember thinking abstractedly. What had started as a crush and moved immediately to full-blown love on my part had kept me imagining ways to tell her; what had started out as disinterest had then moved to friendship before finally becoming... what? Affection? Fondness?

Love?

Whichever, the very fact that Lois now felt these things for me meant that telling her was no longer just an idle fantasy. It had to become a reality — and fast. The fire on my tongue proved that I didn't have a lot of leeway here; Lois wasn't the most patient of women.

But the tears that would have sprung to my eyes — had I been human — due to the intense heat of the rumaki also made it very clear that this could hurt worse than anything else in my life. I could be left with nothing or, even worse, with wounds that would never heal.

And yet no matter how worried I suddenly was, fear of the future wasn't the primary thought circling through my mind and reawakening patience and hope even as I gulped a glassful of water to wash away the potential harm I could inflict.

Lois cared.

Lois wasn't the only one who changed in our relationship, though.

Opening up to anyone has always seemed, to me, to be the most terrifying of prospects. Once a secret is told, it can never be untold. Once a mask is taken off, it can never be put back on. Once I was revealed, I could never go back to being just Clark Kent.

Once she saw me for who I really was... I could never go back to before. And what if the "before" was better than the "after"?

Secrets — *one* secret — have molded my entire life, and secrecy was the way I lived that life. That's not an easy habit to break... but I did. I broke it because Lois is more important to me than safety through secrecy. And because a love that risks nothing is worth nothing. So I risked it all... and I gained it all.

Lois has seen me without the mask, knows me past the lies, and she still calls me Clark. She still loves me. Her knowing my secret had not destroyed my world; rather, it made it a place worth living.

And once I began sharing secrets, it was hard to stop, hard to imagine ever going back to a place where Lois wasn't my confidant, the one person I could trust with *all* my secrets. I would risk anything for her, dare anything, try anything.

As an example of that, I even changed my mom's award-winning tomato sauce for her. Lois doesn't like onions, so I took them out of the sauce even though the recipe calls for it.

Not a big change, perhaps, but it seemed symbolic at the time. Lois and I were engaged, we were about to start our new life together as a married couple, so I changed the recipe for her. A symbol that whereas I wouldn't change for others, I would change for her. Just as she had cooked for me and no one else.

Unfortunately, the timing must have been wrong because the taste of onion-less tomato sauce could not overpower the betrayal I felt when the world believed the worst of Superman.

When *Lois* believed lies about me.

Understandable, I told myself as I cleared the dishes from the dinner I had made so carefully and of which neither one of us had eaten too much. It was understandable that Lois would doubt me. After all, I had lied to her before; why shouldn't she believe that I would lie again?

But I had never betrayed her with a woman. I had never fathered a child and then abandoned him. I had never left a super-powered infant to face the cruel world alone.

Yet both Lois and the world believed I had. And once again, it was only my parents who believed in me. Who stood there with me and trusted me. Who never doubted me.

The tomato sauce had gone to waste, but the changes I had made for Lois hadn't disappeared. So I systematically tamped down on and destroyed any betrayal and hurt I felt. I laid out my defense before Lois in an effort to win her back. I promised her that I had not lied to her — would not lie to her.

And she believed me. Despite the fact that I had lied to her in the past about my identity, she listened to me... and she believed in me.

And I have to say... I prefer tomato sauce without onions.

I've traveled all over this world and even to a palace in space. In those places, I've tasted a hundred different flavors, a thousand combinations of spices and seasonings, a mélange of sweet and sour and bland and hot and everything in between. But none of them can compare to the taste of Lois.

There was always a touch of guilt to the kisses between us before she knew my secret, always the whisper at the back of my mind that told me she didn't know she was kissing an alien. She didn't know she was kissing her partner, Clark Kent. Usually the whisper was submerged beneath the sensation of the mixture of strange and amazing tastes that was Lois Lane, and at times, like the kiss the day after our first date, I almost thought it didn't matter.

But it did.

I know it mattered because the taste of her kiss after she knew me as Superman and Clark was a thousand times sweeter and more intoxicating than any that had come before.

From the moment of our first kiss, I've always been blown away by the explosion of tastes that she offers me. Each day is a different concoction, each moment a separate flavor, each kiss its own brand of delight. From hesitance to bravado to tears to

passion to fear to tenderness and everything in between — Lois kisses just as she feels.

I remember that first kiss on Trask's plane, a diversion that I accepted as truth for a long, dreamlike moment. She held her hands up to my face as if to control how far I went, her movements slow and cautious.

I remember the time I kissed her to distract the maid and the moment I kissed her goodbye. I remember how she kept her hands away from me, neither resisting nor controlling those kisses.

I remember how she kissed Superman when that was all he was to her — the total abandonment in her posture, the overt enthusiasm as if to make up for the stiffness on my part.

I remember the tenderness of the first kiss she willingly and freely gave Clark Kent, the way I could taste that I had affected her as much as she had been affecting me from the moment I met her.

And I remember the way she kissed me in my apartment after risking her heart by telling me she chose me above everyone else — the way she wrapped her arms around my neck and refused to let go, surrendering herself to me completely.

I would have sworn beforehand that no taste could rival those, but I would have been wrong. Because even after finding out that I had lied to her — that I was two men to her — she kissed me and tasted of happiness and acceptance. She gave herself over into my arms and then pulled back and kissed me once, twice with her eyes wide open, knowing me — the whole me — as she never had before... and still choosing to kiss me, still trusting herself to me.

Since then, I never know what taste she will offer me when I bend to touch my lips to hers, but I know that it will be more exotic, more delicious, more surprising than any other taste could ever be.

I know that whatever the taste is — whatever part of her heart she offers me at that moment — I will love it because I love her.

That taste... what can I say? It's what makes life worth living.

THE END