

# Frankly, My Dear, I Don't Like Pearl Jam

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Summary: When Clark asks Lois on a date, he wasn't expecting her to say yes quite so readily. So much so that he didn't actually have a plan. When he panic-buys two tickets to Pearl Jam, he finds himself feeling very much like a fish out of water. Still, anything is worth it if it means a date with Lois. After all, they appear to be her favourite band... A multiauthored story by Sara Kraft and lovetvfan.

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A look at what might have happened if their first date hadn't been postponed in the episode "The Phoenix."

Author's Note: So both KSaraSara and I find it absolutely hilarious that in the episode The Phoenix, Clark finally gets the nerve to ask Lois on a date and then buys Pearl Jam tickets. Given that Pearl Jam is not a band either of us have ever pictured them listening to, it has prompted many a messaging session back and forth. So one night I thought to myself, what if they had gone to see Pearl Jam? What might have happened if the two of them ended up on a date that they really wanted to be on, but also didn't want to be on?

So, of course, I messaged my partner in crime KSaraSara and told her she HAD to write this story with me. She wasn't too sure at first, but I pestered and bugged her and threatened her life...you know, all normal totally ordinary stuff until she relented. And now, we have this cute little first date story.

Many thanks as always to KSaraSara who puts up with my weirdness and allows me to bully her — er gently coerce her — into writing with me!

Also any and all opinions of Pearl Jam are that of the author's and do not reflect the talent of the band themselves. We apologise to any Pearl Jam fans reading this.

Thank you to GooBoo, who GE'd this for the archive!

Enjoy!

## Chapter 1

"We'll never get this paper out by deadline!" Perry White's voice carried across the newsroom in a way only he could. "I want everyone's stories on my desk in ten minutes flat!"

He sounded irritated, but Lois Lane knew that he secretly thrived on the thrill of waiting until the very last minute to put the paper to bed. After all, any good reporter knew that a story could break at any second. She was grateful she had already turned her latest piece in, or Perry would be breathing down her neck too.

Instead, she'd gotten up, stretched and made her way over to the coffee maker for her second cup of the day. As she shook the little packet of artificial sweetener and put it into her coffee, she pictured the look of inevitable amusement on her partner Clark Kent's face when she made her way back to her desk. He'd commented more than once on her supposed caffeine addiction but never failed to make her coffee any time she asked and sometimes when she didn't.

A warm flutter ran through her as she thought of her partner. It had been happening more and more lately despite her best efforts to suppress it. In the past, she had told herself that she was imagining it, or that if she did feel an attraction to him, it was purely physical. After all, she'd seen him without a shirt on, and anyone with eyes could see he was gorgeous. But those little moments had been adding up over the last few months.

Like the fact that he'd abandoned his Christmas dinner in Smallville with his parents last month to have dinner with her. Or the fact that his parents had called her family. Or the fact that every time he smiled, she wanted to kiss him. She had no idea why, she just...did. And when he was around her, he smiled a lot.

In fact, as she picked up the milk to pour it into her coffee, she felt him approach behind her, and that same warm flutter ran through her again, this time stronger than before.

"Uh, Lois...I-I want to ask you something." She turned, noticing that he sounded nervous, though he was trying to hide it. She frowned slightly.

"Ooh, I'm not going to like it, am I?" she guessed.

"What makes you say that?" he asked as she stirred her coffee. She could feel the anxiety rolling off him, and it made her anxious too.

"You've got that tone in your voice," she explained patiently, hoping she sounded reassuring. Was he in trouble? Did he need her help? "You know, when people are uncomfortable. Like when they want to borrow your car, or money, your clothes..."

“Oh, okay, you got me,” Clark said with a slight hint of that impish smile she’d come to love when they were bantering back and forth. “I-I wanna borrow your clothes.”

Before she could stop herself, she found her voice adopting a flirty tone as she replied to him.

“I bet you’d look real cute in black chiffon.” She was thankful he couldn’t see the slight blush on her cheeks as she turned away from him and headed back towards her desk. Why did this keep happening? Why did she keep feeling so tongue tied and nervous around him these days? They were together all the time!

“Uh, what I want to say is, uh —”

“I know what you want, Clark,” she interrupted, telling herself it had to be something simple, but also something that Clark might feel mildly embarrassed asking for help with. Since it definitely wasn’t borrowing her clothing, it had to be money. She still made more than he did, and she knew that living in a city like Metropolis wasn’t cheap. She didn’t think of Clark as someone who would have his self-worth tied into how much money he made, but she also knew men were fragile creatures at times, and Clark was no exception.

“You do?” Clark asked, clearly surprised. Her heart sank a little as she took his reaction as confirmation of her theory. For some reason, she’d been hoping for something else, something...more. But, she was happy to help him if he needed her. More than happy. The idea that he would come to her about something like this only proved just how close they were. She liked that thought at least.

“I know you a lot better than you think,” she told him as they walked together. It suddenly occurred to her that she’d never known anyone quite as well as she knew him. It was a nice feeling to know someone that completely. Shaking those thoughts off, she decided to get right down to it. “How much do you need?”

“What?” he exclaimed — a bit quickly, telling Lois she had been right. “No, I don’t want money, Lois.”

“Clark, you don’t have to be embarrassed,” she reassured him. She suddenly wondered just how much it was that he needed. Would she need to dip into her savings? She was surprised to realise that for him, she would. After all, Clark would definitely pay her back. “That’s what friends are for. Just tell me how much.”

“Lois, I want you to go out with me!” Clark exclaimed, frustration replacing his earlier nervousness. Lois froze in her tracks and turned to look into the eyes of her partner, who seemed flustered but a little more confident now. Conversely, her hands were suddenly shaking ever so slightly.

“What?” Great reaction, Lois, she thought. Real eloquent. But still...did he mean what she thought he meant? She decided to find out. “You’re...asking me out?”

“Yeah...you know...” he said, obviously grateful that they were both on the same page. She was, but now her entire body was a mass of nerves and her mouth felt dry. “...like...on a date?”

Oh God, he meant it. And she loved the way it sounded coming out of his mouth. A date. A date with her partner. A night out where they didn’t talk about work and dressed up and he kissed her at her door at the end of it. The image of what it might be like to kiss him flickered through her brain and she almost gasped aloud. A date. Oh boy.

“A date?” she echoed, her own nerves showing now and a silly smile playing across her face as she looked into his deep and eager brown eyes. “You mean a real date? Like where I take out my good perfume, the one I bought after I saw ‘Love Affair’, the good one not the remake, and put a dab behind my knee, I don’t even know why?”

Oh, God, she was babbling. And worse, she was telling him all her first date secrets. She must sound ridiculous. But instead, he smiled even more.

“Yeah,” he replied, an endearing grin lighting up his entire face. “I guess that’s what I’m saying.” Lois drew in a breath of air and slowly sank down into her chair.

A date. A date with Clark. The two of them together in a romantic setting. The possibility of him touching her, kissing her...had she remembered to breathe? Oh right, yes. She was aware that he was looking at her expectantly and though part of her wanted to jump up and say ‘yes! Yes I’ll go out with you!’, she suddenly became very aware that, whether things worked out or not, their relationship would change if they went out.

New pressures would be introduced along with expectations. Lois had never been good with relationships. Every one of her past ones could be classified as no less than federal disasters. What if she screwed things up and lost her best friend for good?

“Well, that’s...Well, I...I just...I don’t...I don’t know what to say,” she replied, still stalling for time. She wanted to go out with him. Desperately. But she didn’t want things to change. Lois was not good with change. After all, the last time there had been a major change in her life, she’d nearly married a psychopath. The last thing she wanted to do was say yes to a date with Clark and end up married the next day in Vegas.

“Well, most people either choose yes or no,” Clark said patiently. He suddenly looked remarkably calm, where a moment ago he’d seemed so nervous. Why? Why was he calm now? Why was she suddenly a nervous wreck?

“Well, it’s not that easy,” she said slightly defensively. “I mean, it’s easy for you because you’ve had time to think about it. You’ve had time to plan what you’re going to say...and what you’re gonna say depending on what I say back to you —”

“Lois,” he interrupted, looking at her with amusement, and she realised she was babbling. She also noticed that he smelled really good — like pine trees in the predawn morning. Was that cologne? Or did he always smell that good?

“I’m just trying to ask you out, not trying to negotiate a nuclear arms treaty,” he pointed out, and the lighthearted tone in his voice eased her nerves a little. She still felt as if every part of her body was suddenly hyper-aware of his every movement. How could she go from feeling completely comfortable with him in every way to jumping at even the thought of him touching her in the span of thirty seconds? Oh, right...she’d thought about kissing him.

“Well...there are a lot of things to consider,” she pointed out logically. After all, maybe he hadn’t thought about the ramifications this could have. Had he planned this? Or had it been a whim? “Our partnership, our friendship, our relationship with the people in the office. What I’d wear...”

There was a slight flicker in his eyes that Lois could only wonder about at her last sentence. Was he picturing her in something? Did he have a preferred outfit? Oh God, had he fantasised about her? Suddenly she wanted more than ever for the answer to be yes.

“Lois. Don’t over analyse it,” he urged softly. “Just go with your feelings.”

She suddenly realised that not once during this entire exchange had he responded with hurt or wounded pride. He seemed to inherently understand that her hesitation had nothing to do with whether or not she had feelings for him and everything to do with how those feelings might impact them going forward. She was struck by how incredible that was — that he knew her that well and that he could be so patient despite her answer not being an immediate ‘yes’.

It was that very patience that allowed her to give in to the butterflies that were doing backflips in her stomach and look up at him with a shy smile.

“Okay, then, yes.”

“Yes?” he echoed, sounding slightly stunned, as if he hadn’t actually entertained the idea that she might say yes.

“Yes,” she replied, warming even more to the concept and feeling those butterflies increase. She stood up again and their eyes met. Suddenly all the noise and din of the newsroom seemed to die away. She took a tiny step forward as if drawn to him by some invisible force. She was going on a date with Clark Kent. She’d said yes.

“Okay,” Clark said, running a hand through his hair nervously as an excited grin spread across his face. “Yes. That’s great! Wonderful, even!”

A beat passed between them, and it seemed as if neither of them had any idea what to say. It was as if everything

and nothing had been said all at once, and she felt both comforted and completely unbalanced by him. Finally, she forced herself to speak again.

“So, uh, where do you want to go?”

“Go?” Clark echoed, confused.

“On the date,” she clarified. A look passed over his face and she realised that he really hadn’t thought about what he would do if she said yes. Her heart flipped over at the thought of him naturally assuming he would be turned down but having the courage to ask anyway.

“I, uh, can I get back to you on that?” he asked, looking slightly embarrassed. She smiled softly and touched his arm in reassurance. He looked grateful.

“Of course,” she replied. He opened his mouth to speak when Perry suddenly reappeared from his office, and, if possible, even more irate than before.

“Kent!” he barked. Clark’s head shot up and he looked slightly guilty. “Did you get that robbery piece finished?”

“Uh, I was just touching up a few things, Chief,” Clark replied with a sheepish smile.

“Well, get to it! This isn’t some ladies’ luncheon at Buckingham Palace! We have a deadline!”

“Sure thing, Chief,” Clark replied. He shot her an apologetic look, but part of him seemed almost relieved that Perry was yelling at him, as it gave him an excuse to retreat to his desk.

“Go,” she said, making a shooing motion with her hands. “We’ll plan this later.”

“You sure?” he asked, suddenly nervous again. She decided he was incredibly sexy when he was nervous. And when he was confident. And when he was...Oh, God. “I mean you’re not going to change your mind?”

“I might if you get fired,” she replied with a grin. “Go. We’ll talk later.”

He nodded and turned to head back to his desk.

“Clark?” she called back to him, unable to resist. He turned back and the look on his face made her melt. “I can’t wait.”

He grinned.

She was going on a date. With Clark. With her best friend.

Oh, God.

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## Chapter 2

It was all he could do to focus on finishing the robbery story for Perry. On any given day, Lois was definitely capable of driving him to distraction, usually without any knowledge on her part. Today, though? Oh, today was a challenge.

He’d finally, finally had the courage to ask her out... and after a bit of a conversational struggle to get the

question out...he'd asked, she'd nervously babbled before saying yes, and then... then...

He couldn't believe he hadn't actually planned what to do or say if she'd said yes! He'd dreamed of her saying yes, imagined it a million times in his mind...but he'd built it up so much in his head, this asking of the question and getting the answer he wanted, that he'd just plain forgotten to actually have a plan in place.

So, while he wasn't ever happy to be the target of Perry's wrath, today he'd been a bit relieved, if only to have the reprieve.

She'd said yes. Yes. To go on a date with him. A real date.

He was going on a date. With Lois. His best friend and love of his life.

He should be thrilled beyond measure, but he had managed to work himself into a bit of a panic. A glance in her direction told him that she was busy for the moment, probably typing up notes on the mayor's latest press conference.

Why hadn't he come up with a plan beforehand? Had he expected her to say no? He was more optimistic than that! What was wrong with him?

Clearly, he had trouble thinking straight when it came to the brilliant and beautiful woman across the way. But, honestly, he was beyond frustrated with himself that this, of all things, he hadn't planned ahead for.

He shook himself mentally. First, his article. Focusing as best as he could, he finished up the last part of the story and sent it off to Perry before he could get distracted again. It wasn't his best work by far, and he felt a bit guilty, but there wasn't much he could do about the state of his mind today.

So...date. A date. Where the heck was he supposed to take the most amazing and beautiful woman in the world on a date? In his dreams, it had always been a moonlit walk and dinner in Paris under the stars. Or he'd make her a delicious home cooked meal and they'd just eat and talk all night at his kitchen table.

Paris obviously wasn't feasible. And the other didn't... it didn't seem quite special enough for Lois. He wanted to dazzle her, sweep her off her feet.

Dinner and a movie...that was too...cliche, wasn't it? Too normal and boring and expected. Oh, God...the first date was so much pressure. Why hadn't he thought of this?

Clark fumbled for his Rolodex and flipped through at super speed, hoping it might pass for an idle browsing to the casual onlooker.

There — David, that guy from last year's conference in New York! He'd said he was some sort of ticket broker, and he worked the bigger East Coast cities like New York and Metropolis. That was it! He could take Lois to some

show, like an off-Broadway play or a concert. Maybe an opera. That would be different. Impressive. Dazzling.

Clark put in a quick call to David's office, leaving a message with his secretary that he was looking for the perfect event to rock someone's socks off with, to really impress a gal. Okay, so that wasn't a phrase he used too often...or at all. Was that even the right phrase? But David seemed like the posh and trendy type, and Clark didn't want to sound unhip or anything.

In any case, he'd done what he could for now and just needed to wait on a call back. David was, for all appearances, a cultured guy; surely he'd understand his need to impress Lois on their first date.

Looking back over at her desk, he found she wasn't there. A quick check with his senses told him she was in Perry's office about another story assignment — a solo one. Things had been a little slow lately, and he'd needed to have them work separately.

He thought back to her shy smile and the soft, flirtatious pitch of her voice as she'd finally answered him. The exciting thrum of nerves and feeling of warmth returned to him now in a rush.

All his imagined yes's from her hadn't even come close to how it'd felt when she'd actually uttered the word. His breath had hitched and the wild fluttering of her heart had filled his ears when she'd repeated her yes and stood up, hovering ever closer to him.

And, of course, every imagined scenario hadn't included even half as much hesitation as she'd actually displayed. He understood. Completely understood. She didn't really do relationships, and trust with Lois was hard won. He wished he could reassure her that he would always be her friend no matter what; he couldn't imagine his life without her.

He had every hope that things would work out between them; his heart sung with the wish of it, the dream of a happily ever after with Lois Lane. In the meantime, he needed to do everything he could to show her how great they could be together, put her fears to rest about any potential pitfalls. And most importantly, come up with a plan for their first date before she had time to get nervous and reconsider.

Lois came out of Perry's office and went to sit back down at her desk. She smiled over at him but also ducked her head and looked away, blushing. God, she was beautiful. And he needed to not daydream at work about kissing her.

His phone rang then, saving him from falling into another daytime fantasy. "Clark Kent," he answered.

"Kent, it's David hitting you back!"

"David, yes. Thank you for getting back to me so quickly!"

“No problem, man. I’m not sure what exactly you’re looking for but, I’ve got some stage productions and a ballet coming up in the next few weeks. A few concerts.”

Clark glanced over at Lois, his nerves on alert, especially when she noticed him looking and smiled up at him. He couldn’t wait weeks. As brilliant and dedicated a journalist she was, she was a skittish creature when it came to her personal life.

“Do you have anything sooner? This week?” Clark asked quietly, not necessarily wanting Lois to overhear.

“Hmmm...not reall — oh, wait! I did have a sale fall through at the last minute. A Pearl Jam concert tomorrow night. Sold out show, floor seats, man. It’s a sweet deal. Do you want them?”

“Do I want them?” He winced inwardly. He was not really a fan, but maybe Lois was? “Can you hang on a minute?” Clark cupped the receiver and looked up at Lois, who was definitely still looking at him, expectantly.

“Lois, this ticket broker’s got two of the last Pearl Jam tickets for the concert tomorrow night. Would you like to go?”

Her eyes went a bit wide and she bit at the corner of her lip. A few different emotions flitted across her face that he couldn’t quite read. “Oh...um...Wow, tomorrow night. Pearl Jam,” she said with perhaps a touch of apprehension. But then she smiled encouragingly as she stood and came over to perch herself on the corner of his desk. “That sounds great. Really great.”

He nodded and smiled back, his heart in his throat. Tomorrow night, right. Sooner would definitely be better, especially since he was sensing a bit of trepidation from her. And she sounded enthusiastic about the band. He turned his attention back to the phone.

“Okay, I’ll take ‘em,” he told David. Then his heart dropped. A hundred dollars?! He turned his chair slightly away from Lois and lowered his voice. “How much?!”

“Just for you, I’ll knock off some of the fees. Make ‘em \$100 even for each.”

“Each?!” He snuck a quick glance at Lois with a tense smile on his face. She looked a little worried or... something.

“Hey, I’m sure I can find another buyer. These are primo seats.”

Clark panicked. “No, no, no. That sounds reasonable.”

“Good choice, man! Pick up anytime before eight tonight. And hey, good luck with your gal!”

“Okay, great. Thanks,” he said, trying to sound upbeat. Enthusiastic. He hung up the phone and looked at Lois. There was an uncomfortable silence. She seemed...tense? Excited? He used to be far better at reading her moods. But there...a blushing smile. That was good, wasn’t it?

His heart was thudding, threatening to come right out of his chest. But she was smiling at him. And she’d said yes. And they had plans. Official plans. And he was going to take her on a date. “So...”

“So...” she said, the word coming out slowly, accompanied by a breathy, nervous chuckle.

Oh, he hoped he didn’t mess this up. The possibilities, both good and bad, seemed to stretch out between them, the air charged. He couldn’t think of a single thing to say, but apparently she couldn’t either.

“Uh...am I interrupting something?” Jimmy’s voice seemed to break the silence.

Lois stood abruptly. “No!”

“No, no!” Clark added quickly.

Jimmy eyed them, an amused grin taking up his entire face. “It’s okay, guys!” He threw his hands up. “I’m not the principal.” He laughed slightly. “I just thought you’d like to know I have that research you wanted, Clark.”

He took the folder from Jimmy and thanked him.

He turned to look back at Lois, but she was gesturing at his folder and edging away.

“Looks like you’ve got some work to do and I have to...” she trailed off as she nearly tripped over a chair behind her. “I have some work too, but I’m excited for...I mean, I’m looking forward to our —”

“Date,” he finished for her, loving the way the word sounded all of a sudden. Her cheeks flushed in the most endearing way, and suddenly all he could think of was how much he wanted to kiss her.

“Yeah,” she said softly, giving him the sort of smile he’d only ever dreamed of. “Our date.”

They must have stayed there smiling at one another for another minute or two before Lois excused herself and made her way back to her desk.

Clark flipped through the research that Jimmy had given him, but even with his super speed, he didn’t process a word of it. It might as well have been written in Kryptonian. His mind was too busy dwelling on other things.

Like the way she’d smiled at him a moment ago. Or the sound of her voice when she had said yes to the date. Or the fact that, although he knew what it felt like to kiss her, he’d never done so under these circumstances before. All the kisses they had shared in the past had either been goodbyes, life or death situations, or as his alter ego. He’d never just kissed her.

He really wanted to kiss her.

And if things went well tomorrow night, hopefully he would. After all, now they had plans. They had a date. They were...going to see Pearl Jam.

A slight frown crossed his face. It certainly wasn’t the romantic evening he’d envisioned for their first date. But

she'd agreed to it, so she must want to go. He tried to remember if Lois had ever expressed an interest in Pearl Jam, but couldn't recall if she had. He knew that women tended to like Eddie Vedder, if the conversation by the water cooler was anything to go by. He couldn't imagine Lois being attracted to someone with that sort of image, but he couldn't be sure. After all, it wasn't as if he and Lois had ever discussed what attracted her to a man — other than seeing her fawn over Superman.

But she'd agreed to see Pearl Jam with Clark. And she'd agreed to the date before he'd mentioned the concert, so obviously it wasn't Eddie Vedder who she wanted to spend time with, even if she did like Pearl Jam.

Did he like Pearl Jam? He knew one or two of their songs, and while he didn't hate them, he couldn't say he'd ever had any desire to see them perform.

But Lois did. And she wanted to go with him. So he would do his level best to make it the best first date he could.

He tried to picture what she might look like when he picked her up, and had trouble doing so. Any other time he had fantasised about taking her on a date, he'd been able to imagine her in some beautiful, yet tasteful dress and the setting was generally an upscale restaurant in some out of the way place. But what might she wear to a rock concert?

Moreover, what on Earth would he wear? He'd never gone to a concert like this. A suit was completely out of the question. Would a t-shirt and jeans work? Not exactly the most exciting outfit. He wanted to impress her, but he didn't want to seem out of place. What had he gotten himself into?

"Hey, CK, you okay?" Jimmy asked as he walked by again. "You look a little..."

"Jimmy, I need your help!" he blurted out. Jimmy looked at him curiously.

"Sure thing, CK. What do you need?"

"Advice," he admitted. "I think I'm in over my head."

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### Chapter 3

Lois was in over her head. What had happened back there? One moment she'd agreed to go out on a date with her best friend and the next? The next she'd found herself agreeing to a Pearl Jam concert of all things. How had that happened?

She thought about the look on his face when he'd told her his ticket broker had the last two tickets to see Pearl Jam, and did she want to go? That's how it had happened. She'd taken one look at his eager and somewhat apprehensive face and agreed. After all, he had been so nervous earlier and she had been so hesitant. She didn't want him to think she didn't want to go out with him. The truth was, she really did. Like, really did.

But Pearl Jam? Did she even like Pearl Jam? Had she ever listened to a single one of their songs? Could she even name one of their songs? She was a little embarrassed to admit that if there were a gun pointed to her head, she didn't think she could think of a single one.

Clark obviously liked Pearl Jam. After all, he seemed pretty excited when he'd told her they were the last two tickets. She tried to imagine him listening to a band like that, but since she didn't know any songs, the image did not come easily.

Clearly, there were things about Clark Kent she didn't know. She'd always pegged him as having somewhat more classical tastes with maybe the odd country album thrown in there. After all, he was from Kansas. But this? This threw her for a bit of a loop.

What was she going to do? Clark was expecting her to go to this concert with him and she had literally no working knowledge of the band or any idea what to even wear to this kind of thing. She wanted to impress him.

She was surprised when she thought about it, just how much she wanted to impress him. She wanted him to take one look at her and get that look in his eyes — the one he reserved for her and thought she didn't notice. Only this time she wanted to see it directed at her on their first date. She wanted something that would make his pulse race ever so slightly — something that said they were firmly and unequivocally out on a date.

After all, they had gone out as friends many times. This though...this was different. This was potentially the beginning of something new. Something...something she'd been thinking about for a very long time, but was afraid to want.

But she knew now she wanted him. And she would have agreed to a monster truck rally if it meant spending time with him on a capital 'D' date.

But that didn't answer the question of what she should wear. It was times like these when she wished she hadn't unintentionally alienated all of her female friends in her single-minded pursuit of her career. She couldn't ask Jimmy or Perry, as that would be beyond awkward, so... who?

Lucy! She would ask Lucy, of course!

She grabbed her phone and dialled Lucy's number. The call went straight to her answering machine.

"Hello, you've reached Lucy Lane. I'm not home right now. I'm on vacation in Hawaii. If you wish to reach me, leave me a message here, and I will respond when I return. Aloha!"

Lois sighed and hung up. She sighed and tried to think of someone else — anyone else she could call. Who did she know that would be able to tell her what was

appropriate for a Pearl Jam concert but also sexy enough to knock Clark Kent's socks off?

She groaned as she thought of the one person who would have been able to tell her all of those things but no longer worked in the office.

Cat Grant had come into a considerable sum of money last year after her wealthy grandmother had died. It had happened just after the Planet closed, supposedly for good, and she'd made the decision to start her own lifestyle magazine, Cat's World.

Even though the Planet was saved, Cat had felt this was something she needed to do, and though Lois had never been friends with her or even liked her, she respected Cat's ambition. And surprisingly, the magazine was doing fairly well. Lois didn't read it, of course, but she had noticed it appearing more and more on major newsstands and even in some supermarkets.

Could she do it? Could she ask Cat Grant, of all people, what to wear on this date? She knew that the question alone would prompt either a slew of questions or raucous and uproarious laughter with no guarantee that she would actually help her. Could Lois risk the humiliation for the sake of impressing Clark?

She glanced over at Clark and saw he was deep in conversation with Jimmy. Despite that, he must have caught her looking at him because he glanced her way and gave her the barest hint of a smile. It was enough to send her heart flip-flopping all over the newsroom.

Right. She sighed. Cat Grant, it was.

She picked up her coat and scribbled a note for Perry which she left on her desk, saying she was 'looking into something'. She left it deliberately vague for plausible deniability but was fairly certain she would be safe. After all, she had turned in her story on time and hadn't yet been assigned anything new.

She raced out of the newsroom before Perry did see her, and got into her Jeep. She decided that it was better to show up at Cat's new office rather than phone her. After all, it meant that Cat couldn't just slam the phone down after laughing at her. She'd have to laugh her out of the office instead. Of course, Lois was hoping it wouldn't come to that.

First, she stopped at the record store two blocks down from the Planet and picked up Pearl Jam's latest album Vitalogy on cassette tape. She popped it into the tape deck in her Jeep and managed to listen to the first two songs – loud and without any discernible melody to speak of – on the album before arriving at the office that Cat leased for the production of her magazine.

Cat's receptionist, a small woman in her mid-forties, was in the middle of telling her that she couldn't see Ms.

Grant without an appointment when Cat poked her head out of her office door and looked at her in amazement.

"Lois?" she exclaimed, sounding shocked. "I heard your voice out here, but I didn't believe it. It's alright, Estelle, I know her. Come on into my office. I can't wait to hear the reason you've come here of all places."

Cat's face suddenly went from joking to utterly serious and a little worried as they entered her office. She shut the door.

"Wait...nobody died, did they?" she asked Lois worriedly. "Is Perry okay?"

"Perry's fine," Lois said, trying hard to keep the irritation out of her voice. "Can't a former colleague just pop by for a visit?"

"Sure," Cat said shrewdly, "Janet from sales and I get drinks every Tuesday. You on the other hand..."

"Okay, okay, fair point," Lois conceded. She was suddenly starting to think this was a bad idea.

"So, what do you want?" Cat asked with a grin. She clearly liked knowing that Lois had come for a favour of some kind. Lois sighed. It was now or never. She just had to rip the band aid off.

"Clark asked me on a date to a Pearl Jam concert and I have no idea what to wear and nobody to ask because the only friends I have are all male and my co-workers, and my sister is in Hawaii and I can't believe I am asking you this, but will you please help me find an outfit to wear by tomorrow night?"

Cat stared at her in stunned silence for a moment before throwing her head back and laughing. Lois felt her shoulders drop and humiliation flood her cheeks. She stood up.

"I knew this was a bad idea. I'm sorry to have wasted your time. I'll see myself out."

She started for the door.

"Lois, wait. I'm sorry." Cat had stopped laughing, but Lois could see the amusement still in her eyes. "Sit down. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh. Well, okay I did because it's funny, but...sit."

"Why?" Lois said suspiciously. "Are you going to help me?"

"I'll help you," Cat agreed and Lois sat back down. "I just...he asked you to go to see Pearl Jam?"

"That's what you were laughing at?" Lois replied in surprise.

"Of course," Cat said with a shrug. "I mean, Clark asking you out on a date someday was pretty much inevitable, despite my best efforts. Even I could tell he was crazy about you. I'm surprised it took him this long, though. I guess I owe Gary in accounts twenty bucks."

"Wait...you placed a bet on Clark asking me out?" Lois said.

"Oh, not just me," Cat told her. "Last I heard, the pool was up to fifteen people. Jimmy will be disappointed. I think he had two months from now on the chart. Anyway...Pearl Jam? Why? Does Clark even like Pearl Jam?"

"He must," Lois replied, trying to focus on the task at hand. "He managed to get the last two tickets through his ticket broker."

"Wow, yeah he must have a really good broker," Cat mused. "That concert's been sold out for months. Huh. Never pegged him as a fan of grunge, but we can work with it."

"Why would you agree to help me so willingly?" Lois wondered, still slightly suspicious. "After all, we were never friends."

"No, but I do love good gossip," Cat said, her eyes narrowing in a way that told Lois this entire situation had her highly entertained. "And the two best reporters from the Daily Planet going on a date sounds like a column for Cat's World if I ever heard it."

"You want to use my date for a column in your magazine?"

"Lane and Kent are the hottest team in town," Cat replied with a slight smile. "Take it or leave it. That's my offer."

"Fine," she grumbled. "But just the basics for your column. Nothing too...personal. I'm only asking because the date is tomorrow night, and I have only ever heard two Pearl Jam songs and they were both on the way over here. I need help."

"Come over to my apartment once you're finished with work tomorrow," Cat said. "I'll have a few options for you to try on then."

"Alright," she agreed, feeling both reassured and apprehensive at the same time. "Just...nothing too...loud, please?"

"Don't worry," Cat said with a grin that made Lois worry quite a bit. "Clark will never know what hit him."

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#### Chapter 4

Clark stared at the contents of his closet with apprehension. He actually had the required clothing elements. It was just...

What the heck had he been thinking?

He hadn't been. No thinking whatsoever. He'd looked right at her nervous yet excited smile and desperately grabbed at the first available option. Dinner and a movie would have been better than this. Preferable. So much more preferable that he almost wanted to just call Lois and change plans. But he'd spent \$200 on this — non-refundable. And Lois had looked rather excited about the band. So clearly she was a fan, and if that was the case, he

was downright thrilled that he'd lucked into such great tickets for a band she loved.

Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself. He'd survived blasts from nuclear reactors. He could survive a Pearl Jam concert. Especially for Lois.

So...Jimmy had called them a grunge band. And grunge apparently was all the rage. There were times when Clark didn't feel like Jimmy was all that much younger than him, and he wasn't, really. But last night, he might as well have been Jimmy's father.

"Sweet!!" Jimmy had exclaimed while grabbing Clark by the shoulders excitedly, and Clark had been extra glad for his invulnerability. Taking Lois to Pearl Jam was 'epic'. And dressing for it was 'simple'. Because grunge was apparently all about jeans and flannel.

And Clark had jeans. And he had flannel shirts.

Had worn them plenty of times. Practically grew up wearing them. It was essentially the Kansas farmer's uniform. But how it qualified as grunge, he had no clue.

He shrugged and grabbed a blue and green plaid flannel off a hanger and a pair of his best blue jeans out of his dresser. He set his choices on the bed for later, after he shaved and took a shower.

For now, though, he still had hours left in the day before he needed to get ready. Hours and hours. More time wasn't always a good thing. That meant more time to worry about how things were going to go.

But enough of that, he told himself. He had homework to do. If Lois was a fan, he could do this. He would listen to the latest album and he would learn the songs. Some of them. Okay, he would listen to all of them. And...if he had time and could stand it, he would try to learn the lyrics. After all, any one of these songs could be Lois' favourite song.

Maybe he should have asked her which ones were her favourite so he'd only have to learn a few. That was something mutual fans of a band talked about, their favourite songs, right? His eyes drifted over to the phone. She was at work today...he could just give her a quick call. Would that be too obvious? Yeah, that would be too obvious if the only songs he knew were the ones she'd said were her favourites. He just needed to learn more of them.

Had he...? Suddenly Clark couldn't even remember if he'd told her he was a fan. Why was he pretending he was one? To impress her? Win her favour by also loving a band she loved?

Yep. To impress her. He'd do anything to impress her.

Even, apparently, take her to a Pearl Jam concert for their first date.

Okay, this wouldn't be that hard. It was literally a night hanging out with Lois. As his date. Date. How hard could it be?



Clark opened the CD case of the Vitalogy album. Thankfully, Jimmy had had the latest album for him to borrow, as well as a few of their older ones. But Vitalogy was the album they were touring. He hit play and took the CD case over to the couch and sat down.

Last Exit. Okay...was this music? Would it kill the guy to enunciate? Oh, please let there be lyrics in the liner notes. He pulled out the glossy paper, unfolding it and turning it around and around...and around. No lyrics. Now Vedder was screaming. Oh, thank goodness. It's over.

Spin the Black Circle. More screaming. He couldn't fathom Lois liking this...this...noise. Was this song about taking drugs? Clark winced and wondered idly if ear plugs would even work for him. If you took away the scratchy yelling, the music itself wasn't that bad, though a bit repetitive. Maybe Lois liked working out to these songs because they were angry sounding and motivated her to work harder, run faster?

Not For You. Oh, this one wasn't as bad. Nice, even. Because he wasn't screeching. While he found himself agreeing with the song's message that innocence was hard to hang onto in a society that insisted on commodifying everything, it would be nice to hear a melody in even one of the songs. Ah, there was the screaming, low-key screaming at the end. Why was this song almost six minutes long?

Better Man. This one! He knew this one from the radio, and the music was easier on the ears for sure. The meaning was...well, he hadn't really paid attention to the lyrics before, but now that he had...it made him think about all the women he couldn't help, for whom his powers were useless.

Despite the loud noise and nearly unintelligible screaming that aimed to pass as singing for some songs...it seemed like Eddie Vedder was quite the lyricist and social activist.

Maybe that was what attracted Lois to the band, their social messaging, their agenda? That made more sense than anything else. Women's right to choose. Animal rights. Opposing the death penalty. He had to respect them for their views and how they used their fame to spread the messaging about important issues. He just...really, really wished the music wasn't an assault on his ears.

He turned the album over in his hands to look at the cover again. Vitalogy. The study of life...life's doctrine? Maybe tonight wouldn't be so bad. His ears might be ringing for days, but at least he'd be with Lois, and he could enjoy it vicariously through her.

Clark finished listening to the CD and then popped in one of their previous albums. He listened to each twice through, and he thought he at least had the choruses

memorised for about a dozen songs. That would have to do because now it was time to get ready.

Before that, though, he decided it would be a good idea to do a quick patrol of the city, show his cape around different parts of town to try and discourage would-be criminals. Two thwarted muggings and a kitten saved from a storm drain later, Clark was back in his apartment and getting ready for his date.

He gave himself an extra-close shave in the mirror before taking his time in the shower. After spinning into his grunge attire, he realised he wasn't sure if he was supposed to tuck in his shirt or not. Given that grunge meant dirty and grimy, Clark figured untucked was the safer bet. Plus, he could always look around and see what everyone else had done with their flannel shirts.

Would Lois be wearing flannel too? Ripped jeans and flannel wasn't exactly the outfit he'd fantasised about her wearing on a first date, but then, he was hardly wearing his best suit, either.

Not for the first time since rashly purchasing these concert tickets, Clark was lamenting the fact that he hadn't just kept it simple with a romantic dinner at a nice restaurant. That, he knew how to dress for. Knew how to navigate. Knew how it was supposed to begin and end, for the most part.

Concerts were unfamiliar territory. A terrible choice for a first date, unless it had been an orchestral concert, a jazz concert...anything but a band he hardly knew and a genre that was a complete mystery to him.

Dinner was the home field advantage of dates. Pearl Jam was...an away game in a land of which he didn't know the culture nor speak the language.

But he'd done all he could — from wardrobe advice from Jimmy to learning as many songs as he could. Now — hopefully — all that was left was to enjoy the night with Lois. And that...that shouldn't be hard at all.

Clark grabbed his wallet, debated briefly but decided yes on cologne, and headed for the door. He strolled over to Lois' apartment, equal parts excited and nervous. He figured they'd take a cab to the concert, save Lois from driving and worry about parking, so he'd scheduled one for shortly after he picked her up.

He approached Lois' door just before 6 o'clock, and he knocked as he normally did but for the kaleidoscope of butterflies fluttering in his chest. "I've still got thirty seconds," he could hear her call through the door, and he smiled. God, he loved her.

The bundle of energy and beauty that was the love of his life opened the door, swinging it wide open...and said something about the time, but he couldn't be sure what because he was captivated by the vision standing before him.

His eyes were drawn first to the deep burgundy of her lips, and for a moment, he allowed himself to imagine kissing those lips. The creamy skin of her neck and shoulders and collarbone was flawless, exposed by the black tank top with impossibly thin straps. Her long legs disappeared under a tastefully short, black mini-skirt, and she was wearing some sort of chunky, industrial boots that were somehow also a clean and stylish black. And there was flannel. But somehow, she made it hopelessly sexy, the long-sleeved red and black shirt was tied around her waist, accenting the whole outfit.

“Clark?”

“Huh?” He’d been staring. Blatantly, rudely staring... but the bashful and slightly amused smile on her face told him she didn’t exactly mind.

“Hey,” she said, and her voice had that flirty lilt to it that drove him crazy. “You ready to go?”

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## Chapter 5

She should never have done it. She should never have gone to Cat Grant of all people, and asked for her help. What had she been thinking? The two women had never been friends and had barely even been civil when they had worked together and now she was asking for fashion advice?

She’d left work early that day, unable to concentrate on anything but the evening ahead and strangely unnerved by the fact that Clark wasn’t there. If he had been, it might have felt a little more normal, but as it was, Clark’s absence only seemed to remind her that she would soon go home to get ready for her date.

A real date. Not just two friends going out after work, but an honest-to-goodness date where she didn’t see him all day and then he showed up later to take her out.

She stared at herself in the mirror, trying desperately to believe that Cat hadn’t put her in this outfit specifically to make a fool out of her. She felt nervous and completely off balance in something like this. And it wasn’t as if Cat had gone straight for the pleather.

In fact, by Cat’s standards, the outfit Lois had on was relatively tame. She wore a black thin-strapped tank top and a black mini-skirt that reached her mid-thigh, and on her feet she wore a pair of black Doc Martens that she’d borrowed from Cat, who had insisted they were a necessity.

The only colour in her entire outfit was the red and black flannel shirt tied around her waist and her make-up.

Cat had been oddly kind in offering to apply it and did so without making Lois look as if she was auditioning to be a clown in the circus. In fact, she was somewhat jealous of how expertly Cat had done her eyeshadow — using various shades of brown to achieve a smouldering effect.

Lois had worried the deep burgundy lipstick might be a little too much considering the rest of the outfit, but Cat had insisted.

“Lois, honey, trust me on this,” she’d said as she applied the lip liner and then began to fill it in with rich colour. “For an entire year I watched the way he looked at you, and whenever you wore this colour, he watched you just a little bit more.”

“He did?” Lois had found herself saying, which had irritated Cat as she struggled to fix a slight smudge.

“I’m a gossip writer,” Cat had reminded her as she put the finishing touches on. “There was very little I didn’t notice.”

And so she had trusted Cat. Trusted her in the car as she drove back to her apartment and as she waited out the remaining half hour for Clark to arrive. She trusted her until she decided to take one more look at herself in the mirror.

And then she panicked. She panicked because the outfit was too loud, too out there, too not-Lois, too...sexy?

No, that couldn’t be it. She had no problem with sexy. She didn’t even have a problem with wearing something that showed a bit of skin. When she and Clark had investigated Lenny Stoke, the manager of a rock club who she suspected of being behind a series of robberies, she’d snuck into the club wearing the most revealing outfit she could think of.

The outfit she’d worn had put some of Cat’s to shame, and Clark had been at the club that night. He’d seen her with her hair teased, her dramatic makeup and the top that showed off more cleavage than she’d cared to.

But that had been a costume — a ruse. It hadn’t been her. Not the real her anyway. And Clark had known it. When he’d seen her the first thing he’d said was ‘Why are you dressed like that?’

Would he say that now? She hated feeling this nervous. And she knew it was because this concert had thrown her completely for a loop. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t been to rock concerts in the past. After all, she’d seen Bon Jovi with her roommates in college, but this was something different entirely. For one thing, Bon Jovi’s songs contained melodies. For another, she was no longer in college, and Pearl Jam’s music was more than music, from what Cat had told her. It was an entire subculture.

Getting the lowdown from Cat on Pearl Jam had been even more surprising than her agreeing to help her. Cat had seen Pearl Jam in concert before, and was apparently a fan. Lois tried to imagine her in flannel and ripped jeans, but the image wouldn’t come. Still, the fact that she’d had the Doc Martens on hand told Lois there was more to Cat Grant than she’d previously assumed, and so she’d allowed Cat to give her a crash course in Pearl Jam.

It hadn't helped nearly enough. Lois had listened to as much of the album as she could on her way to and from work as well as at Cat's place getting ready. Though there were one or two songs she didn't mind, if she was honest with herself, the rest of it she really didn't care for.

And even more shocking than the image of Cat Grant at a Pearl Jam concert was the image of Clark at one. How had he managed to hide this side of himself from her? She wondered what the appeal was for him. Could it be the social messages in the songs? It had to be. She had trouble picturing him attempting to sing along to the lyrics. In fact, every time she tried to imagine him hitting the same notes as Eddie Vedder in a song like Spin the Black Circle, her brain flat out short circuited.

She checked her watch. He would be here soon. Her nerves ramped up even further as she took yet another glance at herself in the mirror.

She was struck by a sudden, urgent desire to change. She could easily put on something less...less. Jeans and a t-shirt would be okay, right? Cat had said the culture was all about minimalism and comfort, so why not just be comfortable? After all, Clark had seen her in all sorts of clothing — dressed in a long black gown for the Kerth awards and in her frumpiest sweatpants when he had come over to watch movies. Who was she trying to impress?

Clark. She was trying to impress Clark. And she knew how to do that for dinner and a movie. For dinner and a movie, she would put on a flirty but tasteful black dress that was both elegant and flattering. She knew Clark would like something like that.

But would he like her in something like this? Would he see this as an attempt to attract him, or would he look at her the way he did the night he'd seen her in Lenny Stoke's club? Like she was wearing a costume.

Would he think she was sexy? Did she want him to?

Yes. Yes she did. Very much. Suddenly quite a bit.

And before her brain could process that thought, she heard a knock at the door. He was here.

Oh God, he was here. Right now. Right outside that door. Waiting to take her out on a date. She was going on a date with her best friend.

Dressed in a mini-skirt and Doc Martens.

To a Pearl Jam concert.

Focus, Lois, she thought to herself. She checked her watch.

"I've still got thirty seconds!" she called nervously as she raced frantically around her apartment trying to decide what to bring with her. A coat? No, there wouldn't exactly be a coat check, and so many bodies packed tightly into an arena like that would mean it would be very warm. She was only going to the cab and then the venue. It would be fine.

A purse? She didn't want to bring anything too bulky, but she would need to have her wallet, lipstick and a few other essentials. She grabbed a small clutch that she kept for occasions like this — well, not exactly like this — and thrust everything she needed into it, still excitedly aware of the man waiting for her on the other side of her door.

At last, she reached the door and swung it open.

On the other side, Clark stood there. He was wearing a pair of blue jeans that looked as if they had been carefully pressed and cared for and a green and blue plaid flannel shirt buttoned all the way up. If she hadn't known better, she would have sworn that they were going to spend the day on his parent's farm, rather than a grunge concert. Farm or not, he looked good. Really good.

The only part of his outfit that gave any indication of the true purpose of the evening was the fact that he'd left his shirt untucked. She was suddenly seized with insecurity, partly because he was dressed so nicely and neatly and partly because he'd been staring at her ever since she opened the door.

Her heart hammering in her chest, she spoke.

"Right on time as usual," she said somewhat affectionately. She smiled at him, unable to help herself as she remembered yet again, that this was a capital D date. She had no idea why that should make her so nervous and so excited, but it did. She was nervous because he was her best friend. "Clark?"

"Huh?" he said, and a rush of relief flooded her as she realised the look on his face wasn't the same look that he'd given her at the Stoke Club. This was a look of appreciation, of attraction. Desire? Maybe. At least, she hoped it was. Her smile grew a little wider and she felt an overwhelming urge to flirt with him. Her best friend.

Her date.

"Hey," she said, and something about her tone of voice brought him out of his thoughts. She had his full and complete attention. "Are you ready to go?"

"Definitely," he replied, his smile becoming a grin that made her body go slightly weak. There was something in the way he was looking at her. Something different and new. Or maybe not new. Maybe he'd just been hiding it. Either way, she liked it.

She closed her door and was in the process of locking it when he spoke again.

"Is that what you're wearing?" She felt herself freeze. Oh God, he hates the outfit after all! He must have seen her tense because he added, "I mean, don't you need a coat?"

A coat. Right. February. She felt herself relax slightly.

"We're only going to the cab," she reasoned. "I've got my...flannel."

They headed for the door and she felt her cheeks flush ever so slightly. How was this real? They had known each other for over a year. Why did everything feel brand new?

"Are you sure?" he said as they waited for the taxi he'd booked. He looked so sweet, so incredibly, wonderfully, Clark. "I don't want you to get cold."

"I won't," she promised him. "I've got you to keep me warm, remember?"

There it was. That flirty tone of voice. She couldn't seem to control it and it certainly seemed to have an effect on him.

"Yeah," he said quietly. And, taking his cue from her, placed his arm lightly around her shoulders. "You do."

He smelled good. Really good. Had he always smelled this good?

She felt thrilled and scared all at once. It was official now. What was theory, had now been made real. That invisible line separating friendship from...something else, had been breached. She'd put a toe over the line and found herself wanting to put the entire foot. Maybe more. She wanted to see that look on his face again. She didn't need to wait long.

As they stood there, waiting for the taxi to arrive, she could feel his eyes on her once more, giving her outfit a once over.

"You look...incredible," he said softly. She felt a nervous flutter rush through her once more.

"Are you sure?" she asked, a little bit embarrassed to be letting her insecurity shine through, but unable to help it. She wouldn't do that with anybody else, but she could be vulnerable with Clark. It was Clark. Her Clark. Her sweet, thoughtful, and suddenly extremely sexy Clark.

"Very sure," he said, his gaze suddenly more intimate than she expected. "You look...sexy. Can I tell you that?"

"Yes," she gasped slightly. The taxi arrived before she could say anything more, though she wanted to. And before she realised it, his hand was on the small of her back, guiding her into the taxi which would take them to the concert.

The Pearl Jam concert.

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## Chapter 6

The first few minutes of the cab ride had been quiet so far. Clark was trying to wrack his brain for something to say. Why couldn't he think of anything to say? He'd had no trouble while outside waiting for their ride to arrive.

He'd called her incredible looking. And sexy. And she'd let him. Not only that, but the sound of her heartbeat fluttering wildly in his ears told him she liked it.

It was Lois. They literally talked all the time. Every day. About everything.

Something had changed from the moment she'd swung open the door tonight — no, since he'd asked her out yesterday. Something had changed and it was wonderful and thrilling and a little scary all at once.

Was that it, why he couldn't think of anything to say? No...it was because the close quarters of the back of the taxi cab had somehow seemed to capture all their combined nerves and excitement, and the energy swirling around them was both intoxicating and paralyzing.

And so was the fact that she was sitting so very near to him, much closer than she normally sat next to him whenever they'd take a cab instead of driving her Jeep. Much closer. Like the half-bare skin of her thigh was practically touching his denim-encased thigh. He had to fight back the strong urge to put his hand on her knee, but even the thought of doing it set his nerves afire.

He could smell her perfume. Her shampoo. That distinct scent that was just Lois...all of it was so much more intense than it normally was. Everything was more intense.

It was as if someone had flipped a switch when she'd opened the door, and they'd officially gone from partners and best friends to dating and something more. Honestly, he'd thought it would be more of a slow build...some sort of trickling stream of flirting and dating and romance that would gradually fill up a lake — no, the entire ocean that was their future together. That's how it had gone in all his fantasies.

But instead...someone had flung the flood gates wide open and everything from his heart to his libido was powerfully alive and flowing. Was she feeling all of this too? Was it the same for her?

He risked a glance in her direction, almost afraid that if he caught her gaze right now he'd lose all coherent thought in addition to his already absent ability to talk. She was looking at him, and when she caught his gaze, and her smile was somehow awkward and sexy all at once. One of those breathy, nervous chuckles escaped her, and his pulse quickened even more.

When she reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear, her bare arm brushed against his shoulder. Heat and tingling flooded the spot she'd touched as though both their arms had been bare, as if she hadn't touched him a million times before in little ways, both accidental and not.

"So," she said, breaking the silence, "I saw Moist is the opener tonight. I'll bet you're pretty excited to see them in person?"

"Uh, yeah...yeah. Pretty excited." His grinned at her, and God help him, he knew it must look at least half as awkward as his words sounded. He wasn't sure why she thought he might be excited to see them — they were just some opening act, he assumed — but to be honest, he was

still trying to rein his attention back from the pleasant sensation in his shoulder where she'd touched him.

"You know..." She laughed lightly. "I heard a rumour that Cat might have slept with David Usher."

He chuckled cluelessly. "Knowing Cat, that doesn't surprise me."

Maybe he should have invited Jimmy over for a few beers this afternoon and gotten more of a crash course on Pearl Jam and grunge bands. He suddenly felt very much like this was a test he was sorely underprepared for, and Clark Kent had never shown up unprepared for a test.

"I hear they're trying to break into the U.S. market," she said.

Clearly, Lois was enough of a fan of Pearl Jam and the genre that she knew of the gossip surrounding the man who was ostensibly the lead singer of the warm-up band. Not to mention the band's aspirations.

Suddenly, Clark's heart was in his throat instead of giddily bouncing around his chest. "Yeah," he replied, even more lost than with the last bit of trivia. "Well, landing a gig with Pearl Jam is certainly the way to do it."

But it was fine. It would be fine. He was with Lois. She was visibly happy to be with him. Heck, she'd even been a bit flirty with him, using that smooth and slightly seductive tone she only used with —

No, actually, this wasn't the tone she used with Superman — that was far more dreamy and high-pitched sounding. This...this was something new. Something only for Clark. Something that sounded warmer and more intimate while still being flirtatious. And his heart thrilled at the thought, resuming its jaunty skittering.

And he realised he'd missed part of what she'd said. He needed to focus!

"...almost hard to believe Eddie Vedder just turned 30 and is so wildly successful. Can you imagine? It's pretty impressive if you stop and think about it."

"Lois?" he said, his tone adoring as he smiled wryly at her.

"What?" She tilted her head at him adorably.

"You're a brilliant, passionate award-winning journalist — multiple awards — and are undoubtedly the best reporter at a world-renowned newspaper, have been for years. And you're 27."

She ducked her head and blushed furiously. "Clark..." she said softly, and he barely heard her breath catch. When she looked back up at him, her eyes were sparkling and her smile lit up her face. "Keep flirting like that and I might even kiss you goodnight."

His throat went dry and he had to consciously purse his lips to ensure that his mouth wasn't hanging open. Her boldness seemed to quickly fade into bashfulness, but he could tell she wasn't sorry to have said it all the same.

He swallowed. "Count on it," he managed to croak out. It wasn't until he followed her gaze back down that he realised he'd put his hand on her knee, a kind of touch not unfamiliar to them as a gesture of friendly affection and encouragement. But this was...different. The wild fluttering of her heart in his ears returned in full effect. And he found himself short of breath at the thought that his hand was not unwelcome on her bare skin.

Still, this was only their first date. He pulled his hand away gently, setting it on his own knee, but his eyes were on her face now, lost in the depth of beauty staring back at him. "Did I mention you're sexy as well?"

"I think you did, yeah...but you can say it again," she said, letting out a breathy giggle.

The intensity of her stare and the trip-hammering of her heartbeat almost made him lose his nerve, but he braced himself with the exhilarating thrill of the knowledge that he could say it now, unfiltered and unrestrained. And she wanted him to say it.

He took a breath and looked deep into her eyes. "You, Lois Lane, are incredibly sexy," he said, his voice husky with desire.

Her breath whooshed out of her and he might have heard her heart skip a beat. Unconsciously, he found his gaze flitting from her lips to her eyes and back again. And her eyes were doing the same. He was barely breathing as he felt himself leaning, impossibly slow, ever closer toward her mouth.

"We're here!" the cabbie shouted from the front seat.

They both startled at the interruption, and though Clark still desperately wanted to kiss her, he was rather glad their first real kiss hadn't been in the back of a cab on their way to a Pearl Jam concert.

Still working at catching his breath, Clark paid the driver and then exited the cab. He held the door open for her, and his hand was on the small of her back as she slid out and came to stand next to him on the sidewalk.

He felt her shiver lightly and wondered if it was from the chill in the early February evening air or from his touch. If he was lucky, it was both?

"We're here," he said lamely, gesturing to the impressively large arena in front of them.

Metropolis Square Garden stood tall before them, the vertical columns of light a sparkling gold that alternated with the shadowed parts of the building's rounded exterior, the colours matching the album cover. He'd seen the blue and orange of the Marvels and the red and blue of the Comets, but this was a clever use of the lighting.

"Wow," she said as she took in the scene they'd just become a part of. "It definitely looks like a sold out concert! Look at all these people."

“Fellow fans, right?” he said. It was more of a statement than a question, but part of him desperately wished she'd say she wasn't, that this was all some big misunderstanding and that they should go to dinner instead. But that was not the case, and he knew he needed to make the best of this. It was, after all, a date with Lois!

Hundreds of people, it seemed, milling about, socialising in groups...large swaths of flannel and ripped jeans and black and so much eyeliner. This was so not his crowd, and he wondered how on Earth it was Lois' crowd. Well, he supposed being a fan of the band didn't automatically make one part of the crowd. It wasn't like she'd made it sound like she'd be meeting any friends here.

His hand was still on her back — they hadn't moved — and she shivered again. “Are you cold?” he asked, wishing he'd thought to bring a coat for himself so he could give it to her.

She looked over at him and smiled shyly. “A little.”

In a move that felt oddly sensual, he tugged at the flannel around her waist, letting loose the simple knot it'd been in. “Here,” he said softly. “Let's put this on.”

He held it up for her and she slid her arms in, her hands only half peeking out of the sleeves. Once she'd turned back to face him, he suddenly found his hands on her shoulders, rubbing gently up and down her arms in an effort to warm her. Or at least that's what he told himself. Really, the flannel had probably taken care of things, but he'd really wanted another excuse to touch her.

“Thanks, Clark,” she said. When his hands made a final downward stroke and started to fall back to his sides, she made a move to catch one of his hands to hold. “Shall we?”

All he could do was nod and try to focus on walking forward and not the decidedly wonderful tingling in his hand as her fingers threaded to intertwine with his. He was no stranger to walking arm in arm with Lois, her elbow hooked with his or her hands resting in the crook of his elbow as they walked home from a movie or to a work lunch. But hand holding...that seemed to be reserved for the something more aspect of their relationship. And he was giddy at the feel of it, her small hand so perfectly fitting within his.

The usher at the entrance checked their tickets, ripping the stubs off, and handed the remainder back to Clark. Once inside, she'd suggested they head for the snack bar to get some refreshments. Clark smacked himself mentally. He'd forgotten entirely about food. Dinner. Picking her up at 6pm and getting her home God knows when...how had he not planned for food somewhere in there?

Thankfully, she didn't seem to mind at all the prospect of dining on snack bar food and sodas. Maybe that's what she'd done at other concerts she'd gone to.

In any case, he was happy to be familiar with the layout of Metropolis Square Garden. The seating, restrooms and snack bar ought to all be the same as when the Marvels and the Comets were playing. They queued up at the second snack bar window they'd come across, it having a much shorter line than the first.

Much more aware of indie bands and rock performers who liked to frequent smaller, more intimate venues, Clark had always been baffled by the idea of holding a concert in an arena. Though maybe that was because he was from a small town and most of his travels had taken him to small, out-of-the-way locations that didn't have large venues. Or because having played sports all the way throughout college, he was more used to seeing arenas and stadiums used for athletic games.

As they approached the register to give their order, Clark reluctantly let go of Lois' hand. He grabbed for his wallet and gave her a small nod, indicating she should go ahead and order first. Instead, she placed her hand on his, causing his entire body to pause momentarily.

“I'll get this,” she offered. “After all, you got the tickets.” He knew that she was being genuine, and in any other circumstance he might agree. After all, she'd bought him the occasional coffee or takeout at the Planet. But that was a ‘just friends’ thing. Like a group ordering pizza. They were on a date, and he wanted to treat her. But he also didn't want to offend her.

“No, it's okay,” he said after a moment's pause. Her hand was still on his arm and it felt so very good. “I don't mind. I asked you, after all.”

There. That was a reasonable enough reason. The person who asks, should pay. She couldn't argue with that, surely.

“Fair enough,” she replied, running her hand absently up and down his arm. Was she doing this on purpose? “But dinner's on me for our next date.”

Our next date. She'd said that. He'd heard it. She was already thinking of their next date. Clearly he must have done the exact right thing in getting these concert tickets. The show hadn't even started and she wanted to go out with him again.

“Deal,” he replied. “What would you like?”

After getting a small armful of hot dogs — two for her and three for him — and two sodas, they headed to the condiment bar to dress up their dinner.

Lois kept glancing out of the corner of her eye at him. “What?” he asked, a hint of humour but also self-consciousness seeping into his voice.

“You're doing it wrong.”

“Oh, am I?” He laughed and raised his eyebrows at her. Of course that’s what she’d been staring for.

“Yes, onions and relish are a must. Then one thick line of mustard down the middle.”

He wrinkled his nose and shook his head. “Nope. Everyone knows that ballpark dogs only need one line of mustard, one of ketchup, and you’re done. Simple, delicious and classic.”

They both re-wrapped their hot dogs for easier transportation, and she continued her argument as they walked to their seats with their hands full. “We’re not at a ballgame, Clark!”

“But they have the same exact food,” he countered. “Same snack bar. Same food. That doesn’t change what condiments work best with the hot dogs.”

“Well, ballgame or concert, you’re still wrong.” She stuck her tongue out at him.

He tried desperately not to find it sexy, but somehow everything she did tonight seemed to be sexy. “We’ll just have to agree to disagree on that.”

“Okay, fine. We’ll agree that you’re wrong.”

“Hey!” He laughed. “I’ll agree to no such thing.”

They settled in their seats, trying to juggle what food they had and where to put the drinks when there were no cup holders. Thankfully, most of the crowd for the floor seats hadn’t filtered in yet, and they found that putting their drinks on the ground between their feet to be the best option.

“Here, let me hold your other hot dog while you unwrap your first,” Clark said, taking the other wrapped dog from her.

“Thanks,” she said smiling, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “You don’t know what you’re missing with the relish and the onions.” She took a large bite and chewed happily.

“I’ll be perfectly happy with my properly dressed hot dogs. Don’t you worry.” It was both heartwarming and exhilarating to know that their typical friendly banter was not a casualty of moving from friends to something more. He unwrapped and started on his first hot dog, balancing the others carefully in his lap.

“You know,” she said around the last of the hot dog in her mouth. “I don’t know why they couldn’t be bothered to put lids on our drinks. Do you think they ran out?”

He grimaced at her. “It’s a conscious business decision on their part.”

“What?” she asked, incredulous. “Does it really save that much in the budget to not buy lids? Maybe we should do a story on the high cost of ticket prices versus the amenities you get once you’re trapped inside with no other options for food or beverages. It’s a racket! No lids.” She scoffed.

While he loved listening to her rants — when he wasn’t the target, that was — he figured he ought to tell her what he knew before she knocked her drink over in excitement.

“It’s actually to keep people from throwing them at the teams, or the band in this case.”

“Are you serious? Why would they expect people to throw things at the band they paid good money to see? How does that make any sense?”

“Lois, you’ve thrown your remote at the TV for plenty of reasons that didn’t make sense.” Oh, good grief. Why had he said that?

“I’ll have you know that every single one of those times was justified.” She balled up her empty hot dog wrapper and threw it at him.

He caught it handily...maybe too handily because she gave him a surprised look. But he knew she was still wound up about the lids, so she didn’t mention his speed or dexterity.

“Still,” she continued as she took her second hot dog from its carefully perched spot on his knee, “I don’t see why they can’t expect perfectly responsible people to act like civilised adults at venues.”

“You’re right, Lois. I don’t see why they can’t either.”

She grinned widely at him, her mouth full. She finished chewing her latest bite, and then said, “See? I knew you’d come around to your senses. I’m right.”

“Wait...what? Lois, that wasn’t even the same argument!”

“Doesn’t matter. Date rules. I’m always right.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep.”

“Are there consequences if I disagree?”

“Hmm...Maybe.”

And then the silence grew between them, not uncomfortable but for the electricity and energy that seemed to spark, a magnetism that pulled them ever closer by some unknown force. His eyes darted to her deep burgundy lips, and he felt his lips part of their own volition and he leaned in. She was leaning in as well, and it seemed like there was magic in the air.

Suddenly, she sat upright in her chair and cleared her throat. “We, uh, should probably finish our food before the show starts.”

Clark wasn’t sure what, if anything, he’d done wrong. His heart was racing from their near kiss, and he could hear her heart hammering away as well. “Of course. You’re right!” It was a good thing he was sitting because he was definitely having a hard time keeping his balance.

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## Chapter 7

She had been having fun. At a Pearl Jam concert of all things. Still, she had been enjoying it. Okay, so the actual

concert hadn't even started, but that didn't matter. Because she was here with her best friend who was now her date. And their banter had turned to flirting and the flirting had been beyond exhilarating.

Who knew arguing about hot dog toppings could be so...sexy?

So sexy in fact that Lois had found herself drawn to him. She'd found herself suddenly paralysed by his magnetic brown eyes, drawn to their warm depths like a moth to a flame. She'd watched as those same eyes dropped to look at her lips and then back up to her, as if caught doing something they shouldn't be. And she'd known then without a shadow of a doubt that he had been thinking about kissing her, the same way she'd been thinking about kissing him ever since he'd asked her on a date. No, that wasn't true. She'd thought about kissing him long before that. Hell, she had kissed him. She knew what it was like.

But it hadn't ever been real. And then suddenly it was. And she was leaning forward, her heart pounding in her chest anticipating the moment those lips would meet her own, and then out of the corner of her eye she spotted Clark's hot dog clutched in his hand.

Onions. Relish. She'd insisted that those ingredients were a must on a hot dog. Which meant her breath was probably atrocious. She couldn't let her first kiss with Clark be with onion and relish breath. It was bad enough that it might be at a Pearl Jam concert.

She'd sat up abruptly, startling him and accidentally hitting the heel of her foot against the chair. She knew he was surprised when she made the lame excuse that they should finish their food and vowed to make it up to him at some point in the date. After all, she did want to kiss him.

Clark nodded and the two fell silent for the next few moments as they finished their food. Every now and then their eyes met and Lois gave him a smile that she hoped was reassuring. He smiled back and she felt some of the tension leave her.

A few moments later, he stood up and offered to take the food wrappers to the garbage before the show began. She watched him head off in search of a bin, enjoying the view of his backside and thinking about their almost-kiss.

Once out of visual range, she searched through her clutch and was relieved to see she'd thought to bring her breath mints after all. She popped one into her mouth and hoped it would help. A tiny seed of doubt planted itself in her mind as she realised that she never would have had to worry about having onion breath around Clark when they were together just as friends. She recalled poker nights with Perry where they'd eaten plates of nachos together or pizza at the Planet with every sort of meat topping under the sun.

She'd never found herself worrying about her appearance, her breath or even hesitating to tell Clark how she felt about books or music before. And yet, here she was on a first date with the man she...with someone she was realising she had very strong feelings for, and she couldn't even bring herself to tell him she didn't actually like the band he'd paid so much for them to see.

She'd thought at first that it was because she wanted to please him. That it was a sign of the way her feelings for him had clearly changed, that she was willing to endure something he clearly enjoyed (though she was baffled as to why) for the sake of her feelings for him. But now it was occurring to her that a gesture such as that only really worked if the other person was aware there was a sacrifice being made.

As it was, what kind of foundation did they hope to build if their first date was built around Lois lying to him?

Her musings were interrupted by Clark's return and the subsequent dimming of the lights. The opening band was about to come on, so it was too late for Lois to say anything now.

People made their way back to their seats, aware the show was about to start just as many others made their way to the area between the floor seats and the stage that Lois knew was to become the mosh pit. Cat had given her the full rundown on the dos and don'ts of an alternative concert, and Lois found herself grateful Clark hadn't wanted to be in the mosh pit. She tried hard to picture him throwing himself at other people with the sole intent on smashing his body into theirs and it caused a giggle to bubble up inside of her.

"Something funny?" he asked. She shook her head and before she could say anything else, a cheer rose up in the arena like a cresting wave. A loud voice came through the speakers causing Lois to wince slightly. She knew he'd gone out of his way to get good seats, but they were awfully close for her poor ears.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I present tonight's opening act. All the way from Vancouver, Canada, please welcome Moist!"

Another loud cheer went up and Lois watched as four men took the stage. Rather than introduce themselves, the drummer simply counted the band down and they launched into an uptempo rock song.

The lead singer was tall and thin and wound his way around the stage with the competence of someone who was born to command a stage. He had shoulder-length dark hair, which seemed to be required for the crowd, but she was close enough to see his features were quite handsome as well. Not quite as much as her date, mind you, but enough that even the skeptical audience members had decided to pay attention to the opening act.



Lois was surprised to find that she didn't find the lead singer of this band quite as abrasive as with Pearl Jam. Though it might not be something she would find herself listening to in the Jeep, she found herself tapping her toe to the beat of the song, which appeared to be called 'Push' and noticed that Clark seemed to be doing the same as he nodded his head.

He said something to her, though she couldn't hear it over the din. She found herself leaning a little closer and he took that as his cue to do the same. A shiver ran through her as their hands touched and she felt his breath in her ear. His breath did not smell like hot dogs and she wondered if he too had brought mints.

"They're not bad!" she could hear him say. She nodded and closed her eyes as her hand seemed to find his. She watched as the people in front of her joined the mosh pit — the crowd apparently taking to this opening band as they threw themselves left and right.

The song ended and the band launched into something a little less frenzied with a slightly melancholy feel to it that Lois found herself actually enjoying. When that song, which had appeared to be called 'Silver' ended, she found herself distracted by the rest of their set as she leaned into Clark's body, and he wrapped his arm around her, rubbing her arm ever so softly with his thumb. The solidness of his body and the fact that he seemed to know exactly how to touch her caused the rest of the setting to drop away, leaving room only for them.

By the time the opening band had left the stage, Lois found herself breathless in a way that had nothing to do with the music. Reluctantly, Clark moved his hands away from her body to clap and Lois did the same, feeling slightly irritated by Moist for having the audacity to leave and even more irritated by the fact that Pearl Jam were next. Surely Clark wouldn't be quite so fixated on her once his favourite act took the stage.

As they waited for the road crew to remove the equipment and set up for Pearl Jam, Lois turned to her partner.

"The lead singer had quite a presence, didn't he?" Clark asked. Lois could only nod, unsure of what she could say. It suddenly occurred to her that she'd had quite a lot of liquids, and that if she wanted to use the restroom before the main act began, now was the time.

"I'm going to..." she gestured to the door, hoping he understood. For some reason she didn't want to say 'I have to pee' to her partner. What was wrong with her? He nodded, thankfully sparing her the embarrassment, and she told him she would be back in a few moments.

She wasn't the only one who thought it a good idea to use the facilities prior to the show, however, and by the time she flushed the toilet, a loud cheer could be heard

coming from the arena. Pearl Jam must have been on stage because even in the bathroom the cheering felt loud. She washed her hands and checked her makeup in the mirror.

Along with giving her onion breath, the hot dogs had also managed to remove most of her lipstick. Thankfully, she had brought it with her in her clutch and she took a moment or so to re-apply it. Pearl Jam could wait.

Once she was satisfied with the way it looked, she left the bathroom and searched around trying to remember which door she had exited from. She thought she'd found the right one, but once she walked through the door, it was far too dark to tell where her seat was. She wandered forward trying to get a better look, but with the music so loud and the venue so dark, she had no idea where she was. She decided to turn around and head back out again, when suddenly someone slammed into her, knocking her to the ground hard.

She managed to brace her fall with her hands but felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her, and she had scraped her chin. She scrambled to stand when another person slammed violently into her. This time she didn't fall, but was instead propelled hard into the person next to her, who shoved her off him gleefully as if it were a sport.

Fear shot through her as she realised she had somehow managed to stumble into the mosh pit. Before she could think of which way to turn in order to get back to her seat, an elbow caught her on the cheek, knocking her to the floor once more. She fell hard on her shoulder, and scrambled once more to stand. Another flannel-clad moshers launched himself at her, only to find himself getting a knee to the groin and falling to the floor in pain. She felt mildly satisfied, but still frightened. There were a lot of people between her and the seats. She was going to have to start giving as much as she got if she were to get back to the rows of seats she could now see in front of her.

She took a deep breath and began shoving at the jostling bodies writhing around her. She had made it almost a foot, when the crowd seemed to suddenly part in front of her, and a darkened figure moved through the gap towards her. She gasped in surprise when she saw it was Clark making his way to her, a determined look on his face. She found herself being shoved forward once more from behind, but this time, it was Clark who caught her, wrapping his arms around her as if to shield her entire body.

A surge of relief as well as something else shot through her as he kept one arm wrapped around her protectively while using his other to push people out of the way as they threw themselves at them.

He didn't, however, take her back to her seat as she had expected. Instead, he took her out of the floor area entirely

and back into the well-lit gate entrance near the snack bar and the restrooms.

"Are you alright?" he was asking, his arm still wrapped protectively around her. Her heart was still hammering, though this time it was less with fear and more because she was still pressed tightly against his broad, solid chest and he felt...incredible.

"Fine," she said into his flannel shirt. He must not have heard her, because he stepped back, his hands on her shoulders as he looked her up and down. Once back into the light she could see the worry etched all over his face, feeling especially touched that he had left during the first few songs of the band he had paid so much to see to come find her. She wondered briefly how he had managed to even see her in the mass of bodies she'd somehow managed to find herself in, but set that part aside for now. For now, the look he was giving her — the look of concern mixed with worry and deep affection had her attention.

"You're...you're bleeding!" he said, touching her chin. "Are you sure you're okay? Maybe we can find a first aid kit or —"

"I'm fine," she reassured him, taking his hand in hers, as he reached for her again. "Really. It's just a scrape. I can barely feel it. How did you find me anyway?"

"Oh!" He seemed surprised by the question. "I went out to look for you and saw you go through the wrong door on your way back from the bathroom. I thought I would follow in case —"

"Good call," she replied, her sense of relief being suddenly replaced with a deep desire not to go back to their seats. She liked being able to look at Clark. She liked being able to hear Clark when he spoke to her, and more than ever, she liked being held by Clark. She could do none of those things if they went back inside the concert.

Surprisingly, he didn't seem to be in any hurry to go back in either. Instead, he seemed perfectly content to stand there, gently touching her face as if to reassure himself that she was okay.

"Clark?" she said softly. He gave her an almost surprised sort of look then a sheepish smile. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," he replied. Then, as if embarrassed to admit it, added, "I just...didn't like seeing people shove you like that."

"Well, lucky for us both it was a mosh pit and not being thrown out of a plane or something. I'd rather Superman not have to rescue either of us on our first date." She noted that he looked a little pleased when she said she didn't want Superman to spoil their date. Feeling a little bolder, she reached up and pressed her hand to his chest, running it gently down the broad planes of his abdomen.

He gave a sharp intake of breath, letting her know that she'd had the desired effect. She smiled.

"You'd rather not get thrown out of a plane on our next date," he said, somewhat flustered but with a tone that told her he was very much enjoying her touch. "Got it. No planes."

A slightly charged moment passed between them before he finally gave what looked to be a somewhat reluctant glance over at the entrance to their seats.

"Should we, uh..." He gestured to go back inside and she felt her heart drop. Of course he wanted to go back in. She could hear the band launching into another song and realised that, despite trying to listen to as much of the CD as she could, it sounded like pure noise. She didn't want pure noise. She wanted this...standing here, even underneath the awful fluorescent lights, with her hand on his chest and his eyes giving her that look that made her forget to breathe. She wanted that.

"Yeah," she heard herself agreeing though she wished she hadn't. She gestured towards the entrance. They started walking when all of a sudden, Lois found herself grabbing his arm.

"Wait!" she exclaimed. He turned and gave her a quizzical look and she took a deep breath before she could stop herself, she allowed herself to say what she'd been thinking all evening. "I don't want to go back in."

"Oh, of course," Clark said with an understanding nod. Crashing symbols and roaring guitars could be heard through the curtains, so he guided her back towards the snack bar. "We can take a breather for a few minutes if you want. We don't have to go back in yet."

"I don't want a breather. In fact, I don't want to go back in at all. I should have told you this the moment you asked me, but..." She took another deep breath and steeled herself. "I don't like Pearl Jam. I mean, I really don't like them. I only agreed to go to see this concert because you wanted to go so badly and I wanted to go out on a date with you. So I said yes. And I tried, Clark, I really did, but they are just so...so...loud! And maybe that's what you're used to. Maybe that's what they listen to in Smallville, or maybe you came across them on your travels, or saw a Pearl Jam concert in Tibet, or I don't know, but —"

"Lois —"

"I just really can't wrap my head around it. The first band was okay, but —"

"Lois —"

"I don't think I can listen to all the yelling that passes for singing and I —"

"Lois!" She stopped babbling just long enough to notice the shocked and slightly incredulous look on his face. Oh no! Had she ruined their entire night?

"You're...you're honestly telling me that you don't like Pearl Jam at all?" Clark asked. She shook her head and cringed slightly.

"I'm sorry," she told him, "but I had to be honest. Are you mad at me?"

"Mad?" he echoed, still looking a bit dazed.

"Because you spent all that money," she supplied. "I know they were quite pricey, and I promise I will pay you back, but I just couldn't —"

"I don't care about the money," he interrupted, his face breaking into a rather wide grin. "I don't like Pearl Jam either!"

"You...what?" Lois was suddenly beyond confused. "But I thought...but you asked...you don't like them either?"

He shook his head and she found herself grinning just as widely, both from relief as much as from amusement.

"Oh, thank God," she said, throwing her arms around him and pressing her body against him once more in what was supposed to be an innocent hug. But as the hug went on, she could feel his heartbeat increase and she knew hers was doing the same. He was warm, smelled good despite their escape from the mosh pit. She wanted to feel his arms around her forever.

Eventually, she stood back, attempting to catch her breath. She busied herself with smoothing out her tank top when she felt the pad of his thumb touch the side of her face ever so gently. It caused a surge of heat to spread through her and she found herself tipping her face up to look at him.

"Lois..." he said, his voice husky and laden with emotion. She stood on her tiptoes and found herself being pulled into his embrace. He met her halfway, capturing her lips gently and then with more assurance as his arms found their way around her waist, pulling her close to him. Her body pressed against his, she found herself on the receiving end of one of the most tender yet passionate kisses she had ever had. When they broke apart, she found herself flushed and breathing heavily.

He stepped back a bit and ran his hand through his hair. "You want to get out of here?" he asked her, equally as affected.

She nodded eagerly.

He suddenly looked a little bit nervous and fiddled with the button on the bottom of his flannel shirt as he spoke the next sentence. "Do you want to go and maybe get some coffee, or..."

"Coffee," she said firmly, knowing without a doubt what she wanted.

He looked relieved and smiled.

"I know a good place around the corner," he started to say. She interrupted him by placing her finger against his

lips. He stilled immediately and she felt herself smile mischievously.

"Wanna come back to my place for coffee?" Oh, God. That had sounded...really forward, suggestive. Especially because that flirty tone had somehow turned sultry. "I mean...I meant, like, actual coffee..."

But she shouldn't have worried because Clark was nodding and smiling his calm and reassuring Clark smile at her before she even finished backpedalling. "I know what you meant, Lois." He held out his hand and she took it happily. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

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## Chapter 8

This time, riding in the back of the cab was a lot more comfortable. Having his arm around her during the opening act had been amazing, and it gave him the confidence to do it again now. She leaned into him again as she'd done earlier, and his heart started flying once more.

And they'd kissed, too! Their first real kiss.

While he'd practically memorised the way her lips had felt against his during their non-real kisses, and had fantasised countless times about kissing her for real... nothing compared to how it had actually felt. The explosion of passion and tenderness and desire, knowing she'd wanted the kiss as much as he had, the freedom of not having to hold back his real feelings for her...it'd been unlike anything he'd experienced before, and he wanted so much more of that. He couldn't wait until he got to kiss her again.

The flirty, uncertain tension at the beginning of the night had been...exciting and intoxicating, but he was finding he much preferred this, this new feeling that was hard to describe, but it felt like...well, honestly, it felt like when they would hang out as friends except now he was allowed to kiss her and he didn't have to hide his feelings for her.

Clark couldn't resist the urge to place a gentle kiss on her hair near her temple. Her hair against his lips was so soft. Suddenly, he worried that it had been too intimate a gesture, especially for the first date, but then she snuggled in even closer and reached over his lap to grab hold of his opposite hand.

He closed his eyes and tried to soak in every minute detail of this moment. He never wanted to forget it, especially the insanely distracting way she was tracing her fingertips along the back of his hand as she held it in both of hers. If anyone could die happy from just having their hand held, it would be him.

"You know..." she started, and she pushed back a little against his chest and turned so she was looking at him. She bit the corner of her bottom briefly and then said, "I

wanted to go on this date so badly, wanted so desperately for it to go well...that I went to Cat for help." She scrunched her nose in that adorable way she did when she was a little embarrassed.

"You did?!" He tried to temper the surprise in his voice, but he couldn't quite manage it. And it probably didn't matter anyway, because an admission like this...she was trying to let him know how much she'd wanted to go despite his massive first date planning faux pas.

"I spent the entire day listening to Pearl Jam songs on repeat and memorising the lyrics to impress you," he blurted out in response.

"You didn't?" She gasped, and started laughing, swatting him on the chest playfully, but he couldn't help but notice she'd also looked a bit flattered.

"I did." He nodded, laughing with her. "I borrowed the CDs and got my grunge fashion advice from Jimmy...but he failed to mention that my jeans should have been ripped."

"Yeah, I might have noticed that." She giggled and his pulse skittered.

They traded a few tales of their reactions to the songs and lyrics, and by the time the cab pulled up in front of Lois' apartment building, they had both dissolved into a fit of giggles, Lois clinging to his flannel shirt and laughing into his chest. The feeling was so magical, he almost wanted to tell the cabbie to go around the block another time.

"We're here," he said, giving her shoulder a small squeeze with the arm he still had around her.

She sat up and wiped the tears from her eyes, making the smoky effect of her eye makeup even smokier though messier. "Clark, let me get the cab fare, please?" she said, a hand still on his chest.

He smiled and nodded and waited patiently for her to pay before they both got out. As they headed up the steps to her building, his hand found the small of her back, and he could have sworn she might have slowed her pace just a little so that it pressed more firmly against her.

When they reached her door, he let his hand drop while she fished her keys out of her purse and unlocked the door. Once inside, she dropped her things on the side table and turned to lock the door again behind them.

"Well, we're here," she said a bit breathily as she gestured with one arm to her living room.

Things felt slightly awkward now after their closeness in the car, and he guessed that it had to do with the fact that they were alone inside her apartment — not unlike any other night — but this time they were dating. On a date. Technically, still their first date, and while he was confident both of them tacitly agreed on the boundaries,

this was still unfamiliar territory. And there was a lot of ground between kissing and...boundaries.

She turned to him and smiled an awkward smile, and he was reminded... "Your, uh, eyes got a little smudged..." He brought a finger up to his cheekbone to indicate. "I mean, you look fine. More than fine — you're beautiful — I uh...thought you might want to know?"

"Oh! Uh, thanks. Yes! Thank you...and thank you." Her hand went to her face and she was blushing, though he wasn't sure if it was from embarrassment or his butchered compliment. "I'll just go...tidy up." She gestured toward her bathroom and headed that way.

"I'll make the coffee," he called after her.

"Thanks," she called back.

Clark took a deep breath to try and centre himself. He could make coffee in Lois' kitchen, had done so dozens of times. And when he got to the kitchen, he pulled out the filters, filled the carafe with water, and...hesitated when he reached for the coffee. Did he make regular or decaf? Was it presumptuous to make regular and assume they'd stay up late into the night talking like they often did as friends?

Or would it be better to make decaf? Did Lois even have decaf? No...she didn't. So...tea? Should he make tea? Why was this so hard?

He pushed the bag of coffee aside and started digging through her tea choices. He thought he'd just bought her some tea a few months ago for Christmas, but he couldn't...oh, there it was. Sitting on the countertop with the bow still on it. He smiled. He guessed that meant they'd been spending more time at his place lately, because he surely would have opened this by now.

"All set?" she asked, and he startled slightly, not realising she'd come to join him in the kitchen and was standing behind him.

"I, um..." He turned to face her and his breath caught. "Wow."

She ducked her head and looked down at her tank top, pyjama pants, and white socks. "What?"

"You look fantastic."

"Clark," she said softly, a protest in her voice. "I'm not wearing any makeup, and you literally saw me wear this last week during movie night."

"Yeah."

"Yeah, so I can't look that great."

He nodded as he continued staring. "Last week, I wasn't..." Allowed? Was that the right word? "We weren't dating last week," he let out on a breath.

"Oh," she whispered, and he could hear her heart start racing again.

He couldn't take his eyes off her as she tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear and stepped up to the counter beside him. Really close beside him. He blinked and tried

to focus on what he was doing instead because he didn't want to make her uncomfortable by just staring at her all night.

What had he been doing? Right. Tea. Or...coffee?

"Di —" His voice cracked, so he cleared his throat and tried again. "Did you want tea or coffee?"

She didn't answer right away, and he looked up when her hand came to cover one of his. Their eyes met, and it seemed like time stood still for a moment. He wasn't sure he was breathing. Her lips were ever so slightly parted and her eyes kept drifting to his mouth. And then time caught up and they both leaned in and her lips touched his, tentatively at first, and then when he kissed her back and brought his hands up to her face, she pressed more insistently against his mouth as though she couldn't get enough of him. He couldn't either, get enough of her as he moved his lips against hers like a dozen soft caresses. Her hands found their way behind his neck, urging him on. He found himself needing to do a mental check that he wasn't actually floating because it sure felt exactly like floating. And finally, he slowed his pace and then reluctantly pulled away slowly, his hands falling gently, slowly along her neck and shoulders and arms to settle around her waist.

"Wow," she said, breathless as her forehead came to rest against his.

"Yeah," he agreed, just as breathless.

"You should have asked me out a lot sooner."

He let out a soft, self-conscious chuckle, feeling her breath mix with his in the small distance between. "Would you have said yes?" he asked tentatively.

"If I'd known it could be like this," she practically whispered. She turned her head slightly and straightened a bit, looking away for just a second. "I'd like to say yes, but if I'm honest, I don't know."

"Well, fortunately, you said yes to tonight." He felt himself being drawn back to her lips.

"Fortunately..." she echoed, her eyes watching his lips...and then she grinned. "Even though you asked me to Pearl Jam." She giggled in the space between them.

"I panicked!" He laughed, absolutely thrilled that she hadn't moved away yet. Could they stay like this all night?

"How do you panic-buy \$200 worth of tickets to a band you hate?"

"The gal I asked out? She's worth every penny and then some."

\*\*\*

## Chapter 9

Lois had never felt more comfortable on this date than she did in her apartment, with no makeup, a casual tank top and his arms around her waist. She was beyond relieved to discover that both of them had hidden their true feelings because they had been so nervous about the

prospect of their relationship changing. It meant that her behaviour hadn't been some huge red flag that things were doomed to fail.

And, once it was all out in the open, she was ecstatic that they had been able to laugh about it. As friends. As partners. And as something more than that. And there was definitely more between them. She hadn't been sure just how strong her feelings were, but that kiss at the arena, followed by the one just moments ago told her all she needed to know.

"Lois?" he murmured, his brow creasing ever so slightly. "Did I say something —"

"No!" she assured him, reaching up and stroking his cheek lightly with her finger. "I was just thinking about how this has been the best — and worst — first date I've ever had."

He laughed and her heart fluttered at the sight of his smile.

"It's the best — and worst — first date I've ever had too," he replied with a grin. "Though you still haven't answered my question. Coffee or tea?"

"Neither," she replied, taking his hand and leading him into the living room. They sat down together on her couch. She curled her legs up and leaned against his chest. Wordlessly, he pulled her into his arms and they allowed themselves to just sit there for what felt like both forever, and a moment.

"You know, I could get used to this, after tonight," she finally said. A soft rumble against her cheek told her that he'd heard her. "The silence, I mean. I think my ears are still ringing and I don't think I even heard one full Pearl Jam song."

"We could go back if you want," he offered, his tone light and teasing. "I know how they're your favourite band and everything."

"Very funny," she replied, sitting up to see him grinning back at her. "I have to admit, though, I don't think a concert is a good place for a first date, even if it was a band I really did want to see."

"Oh?" he said, giving her a curious look. "Why is that?"

"Well," she thought for a moment, trying to sort out what she wanted to say, lest it come out wrong. "I guess it's because I want to get to know you, and concerts don't lend well to that. You can't really talk, and your focus is on the act and not the other person."

"Lois, you know me," he pointed out softly, though there was something in his eyes she couldn't define.

"You've known me for almost two years now."

"Yes and no," she replied quietly. "I mean, I know you as my partner, and as my best friend. I know you as the guy I can count on to be there for me when I'm scared or

about to do something stupid, or the guy who plays poker with Perry and Jimmy on Friday nights. But...I don't know Clark Kent, the...boyfriend. Or potential boyfriend. Or guy I'm dating or...oh God, shoot me now, please?"

"No, go on," he said, his voice deepening ever so slightly. "I like the way it sounds."

She flushed under the intensity of his gaze, looking down at her thumbs.

"I just...I guess I want time to get to talk to you and to know you." She met his eyes once more and, seeing nothing but deep affection, continued, "Like if we had just met and you'd asked me out and I wasn't so stubborn and said yes...we would be asking ourselves all sorts of questions, like...where did you grow up —"

"Kansas," he replied. She looked up in mild surprise and smiled.

"When did you first know you wanted to be a reporter?" she asked, enjoying the fact that she appeared to have his undivided attention.

"When I joined my school newspaper at sixteen," he answered. "My English teacher Mr. Beeler said 'a good reporter knows the facts. A great reporter understands their meaning'. I guess I've always wanted to understand the meaning behind the facts."

"You never told me that before," Lois said, feeling suddenly as if she were seeing him — really seeing him — for the first time.

"We never went to see Pearl Jam before," Clark replied with a slightly mischievous twinkle in his eye. "Any other questions about my childhood you want to know? To complete the first date experience, that is."

She couldn't help but think he looked mildly nervous. She understood the feeling well, and she found herself taking his hand and squeezing it gently.

"Who did you have your first slow dance with and what song was it?" she asked. He looked a bit surprised by the question.

"The first slow song I ever danced to?" he echoed.

"I figured since we saw a band neither of us liked tonight, I might as well figure out what you do like."

"Ahh," he said with a nod of his head. "Well, I hate to burst your bubble, but the first song I ever slow danced to was 'I Want to Know What Love Is' by Foreigner and I liked that song about as much as I like Pearl Jam."

"Ouch," Lois said with a wince. She knew the song and while it was a bit on the saccharine side, she was surprised to hear Clark, the hopeless romantic disparage it. "Was it the song or...the company?"

"Both?" he mused quietly. "Neither? I don't know." He let go of her and ran his hand through his hair, giving him a ruffled and very appealing look that countered his normal neatness.

"I'm sorry," she apologised with a somewhat sheepish smile. "I get too intense, sometimes."

"Don't be sorry," he said, reaching for her hand once more. "It's one of the things I lo...like best about you. And as for that song, well...I danced to it with my first high school girlfriend, Lana Lang."

"Bad breakup?" she asked, wondering suddenly if she'd brought up a painful memory he'd much rather forget. For some reason, though she knew he must have had previous relationships before, she'd never really considered the possibility that somewhere in his past, a girl may have broken his heart.

"Not exactly," he replied. "Lana was nice enough, I suppose. She had a lot of good qualities but...we weren't right for each other."

For some reason, hearing him say that caused her heart to lift. Though she was prepared for Clark to tell her he'd loved someone in his past, she realised she didn't want to hear it. She watched as he continued, sensing that there was something more he needed to say and wanting to give him the proper space to say it.

"I remember dancing to that song with her and thinking about the incredibly cheesy lyrics, which weren't so cheesy when you're 14, of course." She laughed softly while he continued. "You know... 'I wanna know what love is'. Well, I did. And I think I also knew that it wasn't with Lana. And even that young, I felt deceitful for thinking it and...lonely. But I didn't understand what I was feeling. I just knew that it wasn't supposed to feel like this, you know?"

"Yes, I do," Lois said quietly, almost to herself. Her eyes met his and a significant look passed between them, letting her know he understood exactly what she meant. She did know what it was like to be in a situation that felt incredibly wrong but not to have the right words or tools to express it. But the last thing she wanted was to bring up her failed almost-wedding on their first date, so she let the moment pass and thankfully Clark spoke again.

"What about you? What song was your first slow dance and who was it with?"

Caught off guard, she racked her brain, trying to remember.

"I don't remember his name," she finally admitted with a wince. He raised a non-judgemental eyebrow and she smiled in return. "It was my first boy-girl party at my friend Amy's house, and she put on some music in a desperate attempt to get Jack McArthur to dance with her. Nobody moved at first until she shoved me out onto the carpet and I found myself dancing with some boy I hardly knew."

"You still haven't told me the song," Clark pointed out, and she noticed that he'd started gently running his hands

along her bare arms, causing her to shiver with pleasure. She thought again, trying to keep from being distracted by his touch.

"I think it was 'Sometimes When We Touch,'" she finally said inwardly, thinking it fairly appropriate given the situation. "By Dan Hill."

"I probably know it," he admitted, "but I can't think of the tune at the moment."

"Do you...do you want to hear it?" She felt her breath catch. She was nervous. Suddenly very nervous, though she wasn't entirely sure why. He looked at her quizzically, no doubt wondering why she had the song on hand when she'd just admitted she could barely remember who she had danced with it to.

She stood up and retrieved the CD with the song on it, handing it to Clark.

"Hits from the 70s?" he said, with a raised eyebrow.

"Jimmy was my secret Santa two years ago," she filled in. "That was when he was a little bit afraid of me. I'm guessing he didn't know what to buy, so he got this. Coincidentally, the song is on it."

"He still is, you know," Clark said, a hint of teasing in his voice as he stood up from the couch. She must have looked confused, because his playful smile widened.

"Jimmy. He's still a little bit afraid of you."

"Very funny, Kent," she shot back, feeling that somehow after kissing him the banter between them felt even better. It felt...intimate. "Are you going to dance with me, or what?"

"Always," he said, all teasing gone from his face. Her hand slightly shaky with nerves, Lois put the CD in the player, found the track and pressed play.

The music wafted slowly from her speakers, and she made her way over to Clark, who was looking at her with that intense expression that she found both unnerving and exciting.

Without saying a word, he folded her into his arms, her body pressed gently but firmly against his while they began to sway to the music.

She was lost. Lost in the way he felt, the way he held her, lost in his scent and the gentle kisses he was placing on the top of her head as they danced. She couldn't help but think that from one living room to another decades later, this was far and away the better experience.

*And who am I to judge you*

*On what you say or do?*

*I'm only just beginning to see the real you*

She couldn't help but be amazed that the man who only just three days ago, had been her best friend, was now the same man who was giving her the most intense feelings she had ever experienced. The same man, whose arms she

would happily stay in for a hundred more cheesy songs from the seventies.

She was vaguely aware of the song as it reached the chorus, and the fact that though he claimed not to know the song too well, Clark was now humming softly as they swayed, his chest vibrating softly against her.

*And sometimes when we touch*

*The honesty's too much*

*And I have to close my eyes and hide*

*I wanna hold you til I die*

*Til we both break down and cry*

*I wanna hold you till the fear in me subsides*

She felt his hands as they softly roamed over her back and found herself doing the same, pressing her body closer to his. Something about the way he was touching her — a reverence mixed with cautious hope, caused her to feel a bit bolder.

*Romance and all its strategy*

*Leaves me battling with my pride*

*But through the insecurity*

*Some tenderness survives*

*I'm just another writer*

*Still trapped within my truth*

She remembered the two kisses from earlier in the evening and found herself tipping her head up to meet his gaze. She bit her lip as he glanced once more at her — his eyes hungry but the rest of him restrained. He was waiting for her to let him know that it was okay. She gave the barest of nods and he cupped her face gently in his hands, kissing her gently at first and then more deeply as their tongues met and Lois wound her hands into his hair, urging him closer.

The song dropped away entirely and all that was left was the two of them. Lois felt breathless as they explored each other, his hands now clutching her hips firmly while her heart beat furiously in her chest.

It wasn't until she realised the room had gone silent — the song having ended — that she reluctantly broke the kiss, stepping back and trying surreptitiously to catch her breath. Her face felt flushed and she found her entire body felt alive and humming. Clark seemed to have difficulty finding air as well and she took heart in knowing that he was just as affected by her as she was.

"Some song," he rasped as she made her way over to the CD player as the next song began to play — 'Dancing Queen' by Abba.

"Darn," he said after she'd turned it off, "that one was my favourite."

"Keep it up, I'll buy you tickets to see them for Christmas," she teased.

"You're never going to let me forget this one, are you?" he asked, as she made her way back towards him. He

immediately wrapped his arms around her and she found herself thinking that she could get used to this.

"Never, farmboy," she murmured, leaning in for another heart-stopping kiss. This time it was he who broke the kiss, drawing a ragged breath as he did so.

"I should go," he said reluctantly. "Believe me, I don't want to, but...this could get...dangerous."

"You know me," she said, unable to help herself as she pressed her body against his, "I like danger."

"Different kind of danger," he murmured, kissing her again, and she felt his fingers gently touch the skin of her lower back. Her pulse raced, she pressed her body against his, and this time she felt exactly what he meant by things getting dangerous. Her own body responded and she kept the kiss chaste this time, lest things get too far out of hand.

"I meant what I said, you know," she told him as she walked over with him to her door. "About going on a second date, I mean. Only this time, we both discuss it. My treat?"

"I would like nothing more," he replied. "Does this mean we're...seeing each other?"

He looked so adorably hopeful that she couldn't help but reach up and gently touch his cheek.

"I think so," she replied. "I'd like to get to know you all over again. If that's what you want."

"It's very much what I want," he said, and he looked as if he wanted to say more, but stopped himself. She felt the need to lighten the mood slightly so she smiled and touched his arm as if wanting to impart a secret.

"Do you know that Cat told me they started a betting pool in the office over how long it would take us to get together?"

"Really?" Clark said with a somewhat pleased smile. As if he liked the idea of the two of them being a foregone conclusion. "I wonder who won?"

"Gary, in accounts apparently," Lois said with a grin. "You think we can get him to share some of the winnings with us?"

"Don't need them," Clark replied softly, gently touching her cheek as if she were the most precious thing he'd ever seen. "This is all I've ever wanted. You are all I've ever wanted."

"Careful, farmboy," Lois said, feeling suddenly breathless at the look in his eyes. "I could get used to this."

"There are things you don't know yet," he warned her softly and she could tell by the look in his eyes that whatever he wanted to say, the time was not right yet. "About me, I mean. Things that could make this... complicated."

He looked nervous and Lois wanted nothing more than to reassure him. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him softly on the cheek.

"As long as none of our dates have us ending up at a Marilyn Manson concert, we will handle it together."

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### **Epilogue**

*Lane and Kent, the Hottest New Couple in Town*

*By Catherine Grant*

For everyone who worked at the Daily Planet a year and a half ago, it was a foregone conclusion that Lois Lane and Clark Kent would, at some point, become an item. Everyone, that is, except for them. Even the hopelessly smitten Clark Kent couldn't have guessed when successful, hard-bitten, Lois Lane would finally let her eyes see what her heart might well have known all along.

The inevitable first date finally happened Saturday night — a Pearl Jam concert at Metropolis Square Garden. Now, if you know anything about this new power couple, you might be trying to figure out how you missed the fact that they are huge fans of grunge music. You didn't miss it. They are not.

In the ultimate meet-cute redux, Lane and Kent — each thinking the other was a massive Pearl Jam fan and too afraid to miss this first date opportunity for their own lack of interest in the band — agreed to attend last Saturday's sold out Pearl Jam concert together. Each of them made monumental efforts to prepare for the date, hoping to make the best of a date they both desperately wanted at a concert they weren't crazy about.

After making it through the opening act and an accidental trip through the mosh pit, they made their escape to a quieter venue to talk, have a good laugh at themselves and decide that — given their dedication to making this first date work when it shouldn't have at all — it was clear they both wanted to make things official.

So, one year, five months, and seven days after Clark Kent walked into the Daily Planet and fell head over heels for Lois Lane, they finally are an official couple. The office betting pool has come to an end. Gary in accounts, I owe you \$20.

THE END