

Asking Lois Out

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Summary: Clark is trying to ask Lois out for their first date. It should be simple, right? A story set in the second season.

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Disclaimer - these characters are not mine.

Part 1

7:46am

Clark Kent's fingers stalled on his keyboard. She was in the elevator. His hearing had locked onto the heartbeat rhythm that was uniquely hers. He listened as the elevator rose, bringing her to him.

It was no fluke he had arrived early this morning. He had hoped to give himself time to fine-tune the plans that had taken up perpetual residence at the forefront of his mind.

He intended to ask Lois out.

On a date.

An official date.

Lois and Clark — together. As a couple ... or at least a potential couple.

He wanted her to know he saw her as far, far more than a colleague. Far more than a friend.

More even than a best friend.

He loved her.

But how best to convey that to her?

He'd decided to ask her for a date. To ask now. Today. This morning. First thing. Before the bustle of stories and work and bad buys and leads and sources could crowd into their lives.

The elevator stopped with a clunk, and its doors slid open. Heavy male footsteps emerged, followed by the ones he knew belonged to Lois Lane.

Keeping his eyes trained on his stagnant computer screen, Clark tracked her progress from the elevator. Her steps were clipped. From the sound of her soles on the floor, she was wearing her brown shoes. They had a half-inch heel, so there must be another reason for the brusqueness of her gait.

She was annoyed, Clark realised. Agitated. Unreceptive.

He looked up, his smile hovering in case his first glimpse of her gave him any hope that it might be effective in combating her mood. The moment he saw her face, his hopes were dashed.

No, this bout of Lois Lane exasperation was going to require far more than a smile.

Her words were galloping free before she even reached his desk. "Do you know what just happened?" she asked. "Coming into the building, I get accosted by that young twerp who started work in the coffee booth last week. You know him? You must know him; he looks like he's still in high school but that doesn't put any sort of dent in his way-over-the-top confidence. Ohhh nooooo. Suddenly, he's there — right in my face. And leading with that sycophantic smirk that could oil a rusty gate.

"He *dares* to lay a perfectly manicured hand on my shoulder and looks deep into my eyes and croons in a voice so thick you

want to gag at the thought of what he could possibly have stuck in his throat, 'I'm free tonight, sweetheart. I'll pick you up about 7:30.'

"Should I pick you up about 7:30?" Lois repeated, her head shaking, and her eyes glinting fire. "Do I look like I want to be picked up? Do I look like a woman who would go out with a libido-infested ego masquerading as a man? Do I look like a woman who would find anything remotely interesting in a powdered, primped, puffed-up, pompous, pubescent playboy?"

"Nice alliteration," Clark said with deep admiration.

Some of Lois's annoyance dissipated. "Sorry, Clark," she said with a wry smile. "I'm a bit worked up."

No kidding. Clark stood and laid what he hoped was a supportive, non-threatening hand on her shoulder. "Would you like me to have a word with him?"

"No," Lois said. "I think I finally got across that I wouldn't be going out with him if he were the last male in Metropolis."

Clark grimaced. "Is he hurt much?" he asked.

She grinned suddenly, and it felt like the sun breaking out from behind a dark and threatening cloud. "Only a small part of him."

Clark grimaced again but his mind moved on quickly from the coffee boy's discomfort. Despite the dubious start, this might be exactly the opening he needed. "You could tell him you're going out with me," he suggested casually.

For a tiny electrified moment, Lois's eyes rammed into his, but too soon, she broke away and said, "Clark, that is very sweet of you, but you don't need to ask me out just to keep the freshman fop from harassing me."

"That's not -"

"It's not necessary." Lois patted his arm and gave him a friendly smile. "Thanks for the offer, Clark, but if the day comes when I can't handle a teenager high on testosterone, that will be the day you need to put me in a retirement home."

She walked away from him and settled at her desk. Clark followed her. "Coffee?" he asked offhandedly.

"Clark, there is no need to -"

"Would you like coffee?" he reiterated, slowly and evenly.

Lois turned on her computer. "I can fight my own battles," she reminded him.

"All I'm offering is coffee," he said. *And a date.*

"Thank you," Lois said, somewhat surprisingly. "That would be lovely."

"OK," Clark said. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

The two people in the elevator stepped out as he entered. The doors slid shut, and Clark was alone.

He hadn't managed to ask Lois for a date, but he had managed to ease her out of her irritated mood. That was progress. Perhaps when he returned with her coffee ...

But when they went out on a story, they would have to pass the coffee booth. And the coffee boy. Lois walked past him multiple times every day — that was probably how he had noticed her.

A few quiet words were needed.

But if Clark delivered the words, he risked Lois's ire turning on him. And that was not going to pave the way for asking her on a date.

Clark reached for his tie and loosened the knot.

Two seconds later, the elevator opened on the ground floor, and Superman strode out. He went directly to the cafe and stopped in front of where the young man was operating the coffee machine with exaggerated flourish. When the kid looked up, his face broke into a wide smirk.

"Superman," he said. "I know why you're here."

Clark seriously doubted that. "Why?"

The young man leant forward and dropped his voice. "Being of alien extraction, I'm guessing you've come for advice

regarding Earth women.” He winked. “You know, a few hints on how to ensure every encounter ends ... satisfactorily.”

Actually, Clark was most interested in *this* encounter ending satisfactorily. “I came to give you some advice,” he said in a tone that most would have realised didn’t bode well.

The young dolt didn’t. He stared at Clark, his face distorted with what appeared to be genuine befuddlement. “I’m not sure I need any advice,” he said. “But I’m willing to share a few pointers with you.” He took a deep breath as if priming himself for a long monologue. “First, it’s very important to be in the right place at the right time — that shouldn’t be hard for you. Then you need to develop the skill of accurately assessing exactly what she wants to hear. Then you —

“Lois Lane,” Clark said through gritted teeth. “Do you know her?”

The coffee boy grinned lecherously, and Clark had to restrain himself from blowing a wind tunnel straight through the middle of the boy’s meticulously untidy thatch of gelled hair. “‘*Know*’ her?” the boy said patronisingly. “I have a *date* with her tonight.”

The kid’s assumption that he could effortlessly attain the very thing Clark had obsessed over for weeks felt like poisoned barbs being scattered through Superman’s stomach.

“Let me make myself clear,” the superhero said in a voice that had gone beyond exasperation and was now dangerously calm. “You do *not* have a date with Ms Lane tonight. You will *never* have a date with her. From now on, you will not look at her, you will not speak to her, you will not touch her, you will not make her coffee, and you will not so much as even *think* her name. Do you understand?”

The coffee boy’s bluster faltered, but only for a moment. Then he winked. “Ooohh, I understand,” he drawled. “You have designs on the little lady yourself?”

“No,” Clark lied, justifying himself because Superman definitely didn’t have ‘designs’ on any ‘little lady’. “I just don’t like to see any woman being hounded.”

“I don’t think you understand,” the kid said. “She -”

“The only thing you need to understand is that Ms Lane finds it repugnant being hit on by a child.”

The coffee boy blanched. “A ... a ... a ch-”

“Impossible as this may be for you to comprehend,” Clark said, pushing home the advantage of having actually gagged the young man. “Lois Lane is not interested in you.”

The coffee boy had remarkable resilience. “That’s OK,” he breezed. “I enjoy the challenge. There’s nothing like a feisty female to separate the men from the boys.”

That exceeded Clark’s limit of patience. He leant forward over the counter and engaged the kid eyeball to eyeball. “Do you remember Ms Lane’s reaction to your approach this morning?”

Clark knew he had hit home — figuratively — when the young man grimaced.

“Next time, it won’t be Ms Lane; it will be me.”

The coffee boy gulped, his Adam’s apple leaping through the pimply skin of his throat.

Clark had no desire to engage in this conversation again, so he decided to drive home his point. He glanced meaningfully to the coffee machine. “I like my coffee beans finely ground,” he observed. “To a pulp.”

The coffee boy’s eyes slowly slid to the coffee machine.

Clark turned and marched out of the building.

He flew to Italy and bought two coffees from the little cafe he knew had the best in Europe.

A minute later, once again dressed as Clark, he gave Lois her coffee. She took it with a smile of thanks and turned back to her work before he could open a conversation.

Clark slumped down into his chair. Not even the coffee could raise his spirits.

Superman had almost lost his cool. Over a teenager!

And Clark hadn’t asked Lois for a date.

Attempt number one: fail.

10:13am

Clark had worked his way through a mountain of background research for the human-interest feature Perry had assigned him for the Sunday edition.

He had also observed Lois — very carefully — as her residual annoyance from the early morning encounter with the coffee boy had slowly evaporated.

By Clark’s estimation, the time was ripe for attempt two.

He watched for an opening — a small change in her posture that could indicate she wouldn’t be too unwelcoming of an interruption. And perhaps receptive to an invitation.

When he saw her lean back in her seat and wriggle her shoulders, he rose from his desk and approached her, hoping to appear natural. “How’s it going, Lois?” he asked.

Her deep sigh wasn’t encouraging. “Do you know who Calvin Montgomery is?”

“No.”

“He’s the second richest man in America. He lives on the West Coast.”

“That’s a long way from Metropolis,” Clark noted.

“Yeah. But Bobby Bigmouth told me Calvin Montgomery has rented a huge mansion on the exclusive side of the port and will be living in Metropolis for three months.”

“Does it check out?”

“Yes. He quietly slipped into town without causing even a ripple through the business world.”

“What are you thinking?” Clark asked.

“Secret takeover attempt? Fraudulent business deals? An affair? Family break-up? Is he running to something? Or away from something?”

“What do you have so far?”

Lois sighed. “I’ve been checking all of his associates - business and personal. Every deal he’s ever done. Every charity he has supported. Every company he’s owned.”

Clark gave a low whistle. “That has got to be a huge list. Need any help?”

“Aren’t you working on a feature for Sunday?”

“Yes,” he said. “But I have some time if you’d like to give me a list.”

Lois smiled at him. “Thanks, Clark,” she said, turning to her computer. “I’ll email you the file. You start at the bottom.”

Clark waited while she sent the email, feverishly forming the words in his mind as his heart pounded with nervousness.

“Lois?”

“Yes?”

“Would you -”

Her phone jangled across his incipient invitation. Her attention hadn’t wavered, Clark noticed, but he couldn’t ask her something this important against the background of clamorous noise.

He gestured to the phone. “You should get that; it could be important.”

Lois picked up the phone. “Really? Where? When? Now? I’ll be there.” She slammed down the phone, rose from her chair in a graceful movement, and hooked her bag on her shoulder. “Got to go,” she said.

Clark felt his panic erupt. He couldn’t ask Lois for a date if she were out chasing a lead and he was stuck in the newsroom. “I’ll come, too,” he said, detouring to his desk to grab his jacket.

She stalled at the elevator and eyed him questioningly. “I thought you were going to be tied up all morning with that touchy-feely piece.”

“I’m nearly done,” Clark said. “And I need to stretch my legs.”

“OK,” she said with a shrug that probably indicated it wouldn’t be her neck on the line if his feature didn’t make deadline.

The elevator doors opened, and the three occupants exited. Clark felt his heart begin to accelerate. This would be his moment — alone in the elevator car with Lois.

“Kent!”

Clark turned to see Perry crossing the bullpen like a hound after a fox. “Chief?” he said, although he knew exactly what was coming.

“I haven’t seen so much as a draft of the feature I gave you two days ago.”

“I’ve been researching, Chief,” Clark said. Behind him, he heard the doors of the elevator close — stealing Lois away from him.

“Researching the local coffee shops with Lois?” Perry said sarcastically.

Clark figured the only acceptable response would be to return to his desk. He did, trying not to look too much like a scolded child.

Attempt number two: fail.

10:58am

Clark used a few extra skills to get his skeleton notes into something resembling a draft and sent it to Perry. Then he worked through the list Lois had sent him.

He didn’t discover anything that was likely to make her particularly happy or particularly grateful for his assistance. He typed a few words to that effect, but paused before sending his reply.

What if he were to ask her out via email? It could definitely be considered the soft option — but it wasn’t so much the fear of her response that made him consider it, but the fear that, unless his luck changed significantly, the opportunity he needed would continue to elude him.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard. He could compose something, he decided, and then if it sounded too bad, he could delete it before sending the email.

Dear Lois, he typed. He stared at it — it looked absurd coming just after he had signed off. He deleted that and tried again.

p.s... Lois ... this is probably not the best way to ask, but my first attempts amounted to nothing, so I thought ...

No, that sounded pathetic.

Again, Clark deleted his last line.

Lois ... I want to ask you out ... on a date. Is there any chance you’d accept?

He read the line over and over. Maybe ... maybe that would work. He hadn’t actually asked her out, so he could still do it properly — face to face. But this might cushion the blow. This might give her some forewarning — so that only one of them would be awkwardly tongue-tied when he actually uttered the scary words.

Which might mean only that her rejection came more quickly, Clark thought grimly.

He pushed the mouse to ‘send’ and hesitated. Then, he closed his eyes and clicked. When he opened them again, his email had been sent.

He’d done it. Well, he’d paved the way.

Clark sank back into his chair, unsure if he felt euphoric or terrified.

It probably depended on how Lois reacted when she read his email.

12:14pm

Clark listened as the elevator returned Lois to the newsroom. As she rose through each level, so too did the intensity of Clark’s

thumping heart. He knew she would come into the bullpen, sit at her computer, and check her emails.

His throat dried.

Two minutes. *Less* than two minutes ... and Lois would know.

There would be no turning back.

The elevator rattled to a stop, and she walked out. Clark glanced up, timing it with perfect precision to catch sight of her the instant she came into view. Her head turned in his direction, and she smiled.

She bypassed her desk and came to his.

Clark groaned silently. Any other time, he would have been delighted to talk with her. But right now, the suspense was excruciating.

“How ... how did it go?” he asked.

Lois groaned. “Nothing I can use,” she said. “I *know* there is something newsworthy about Mr Calvin Montgomery coming to Metropolis, but I can’t discover what, and I’m not close to nailing enough hard evidence that Perry would even read my story.”

Clark gave her a sympathetic smile. “I checked that list for you,” he said.

“Thanks,” Lois said with a smile that lit his world. “Anything jump out?”

“Not really,” Clark replied, wishing he’d found something that would cause her smile to linger.

She put her hand on his arm in a friendly gesture. “Thanks for trying,” she said.

“I emailed you what I got,” he said, trying so hard to keep his tone casual that the words came out sounding hollow.

Did he imagine her gaze lingering on him a heartbeat longer than was necessary? Did he imagine the tiny tweak of her eyebrow raised in muted question? Perhaps she had already discerned that he was behaving oddly today.

He needed to do this. And he needed to do it now. “Lo -”

“CK!” Jimmy sprang from nowhere and shoved a handful of papers at Clark. “Look at this, CK.”

Lois stepped away. “Thanks for your help,” she said over her shoulder.

Clark watched as she moved to her desk. Jimmy had launched into a garbled explanation of why these papers were so earth-shatteringly important. Clark dragged his eyes from Lois and used about ten percent of his attention to speed-read them.

Lois’s chair slid across the floor, and her knees disappeared under her desk.

Ten seconds.

She tapped her keys, logging in. Jimmy was hovering, expecting a response. “Thanks, Jimmy,” Clark said. “This looks great. Good work. I’ll get back to you.”

Five.

Her mouse rolled across her desk as she opened her email account.

“Do you think you’ll be able to use it in your story?” Jimmy asked.

Two.

“Sure,” Clark said. “It’s exactly what I need.”

One.

“ARRGGGH!” Lois shrieked.

Part 2

Stifling the impulse to hide under his desk, Clark forced himself to walk over and face her. “Lois?” he said hesitantly.

But she wasn’t looking at him; she was staring at her monitor with manifest resentment. Clark’s hand instinctively reached out to touch her, but he snatched it back and buried it in his pocket.

Lois gestured furiously at her monitor, her mouth working, but no words forthcoming.

Clark turned to look at her screen.

There was a message.

But not *his* message.

The email server had gone down. They apologised for the inconvenience and regretted to inform their valued customers that accounts would be inaccessible until the problem had been rectified.

Clark felt a surge of relief — it hadn't been his message that had incited Lois's displeasure. He risked a tentative touch to her shoulder. "Perhaps it won't take too long to get it back up," he said. "Were you expecting something in particular?"

"I've been waiting all morning for one of my sources to contact me," Lois said. She stood, suddenly purposeful. "Is your account working?" She charged over to his desk.

With a spurt of speed, Clark arrived first. "We use the same server, Lois," he said. "If you can't access your account, I won't be able to access mine."

"You could try," she threw at him. "Your account must have been working fine when you sent me your email."

"That was over an hour ago."

She shot him her why-are-you-being-so-uncooperative look. With a sigh of surrender, Clark opened his email account.

A message identical to hers popped onto the screen.

Lois hitched her thigh on his desk and eyed him speculatively. "What could possibly be in your inbox that you don't want me to see?" she asked. "Do you have a story?"

I'm trying to ask you out.

The words buffeted through Clark's mind. He opened his mouth, intending to give them release, but they were swallowed up by another idea. "Let's have lunch," he said, trying not to sound too eager. "When we get back, the problem could be fixed."

Hopefully, more than her email account would be fixed. Hopefully, over the course of an entire lunch, he would be able to find a way to ask Lois for a date.

She straightened from his desk, still eyeing him with a bevy of unvoiced questions. "OK," she agreed.

Clark rallied his good humour and sent her what he hoped was a dazzling smile. His optimism lasted less than a minute — razed by the peal of her phone. Clark clenched his fists in frustration as Lois reached to answer it.

From behind, he saw her nod a few times. Each gesture seemed to take her further away from him.

"You can't come to lunch," he guessed disconsolately when she replaced the phone.

"No — just the opposite," she said with a smile. "Let's go."

Hidden deep in his pockets, Clark's fists clenched again — but this time in celebration. He restrained his outward response to a mere smile, and they moved to the elevator.

Attempts three and four: two more failures.

But attempt five was looking decidedly promising.

12:23pm

"That was Bobby," Lois said as the elevator doors closed, granting them privacy to speak. "He says Derrick Renouf is currently having coffee in the Cafe Grand with a woman who is not his wife."

"Derrick Renouf?" Clark questioned. "As in 'Bailey and Renouf Realtors'?"

"Yes. The company handling the property Calvin Montgomery has rented."

"Does Bobby think this is relevant to that story?" Clark said. "Or something else?"

"He didn't say. Renouf is active in many charities and community initiatives. He always travels with his wife and has cultivated the reputation of a family man."

"But even if he's having an affair, it doesn't get us any closer to finding out why Calvin Montgomery has moved to Metropolis," Clark said carefully.

"Montgomery refused my request for an interview," Lois said. "Perhaps Renouf will be more accommodating." She looked up at him with a smile. "Just get coffee, Clark. We can have lunch when we're done."

Clark nodded, and when they arrived at the Cafe Grand, he ordered two coffees. Lois leaned in closer, and her breath floated across his ear. "They're behind us; slightly to the right."

They took a table near the door — Lois choosing the seat facing Renouf and his companion. She shuffled her seat sideways, using Clark's body as cover. "I can't hear what they are saying," she murmured from behind her hand.

"How do they look?" Clark asked. "Like they are discussing business?"

"No. They look more familiar than that."

"Lovers' familiar? Or 'friends' familiar?"

"She just put her hand on his arm."

"What does that mean?" Clark asked, thinking of how often Lois put her hand on his arm.

"Nothing."

Nothing? The edges of his hope began to fray.

"Nothing that might get us a story," Lois said. "It means they're comfortable together."

Comfortable together. Clark's spirits deflated further. Yes, he and Lois had become comfortable together. Like two old friends. Friends who would never be anything more than friends — unless he spoke up. She wasn't looking at him — her attention was directed beyond his left shoulder.

This was an opportunity.

Not ideal.

But she wasn't angry.

Or exasperated.

Her phone wasn't ringing.

And they were alone.

Clark took a deep breath and plunged in. "Lois, would you go _"

"Ms Lane," came a deep voice from behind him.

Clark stood and turned.

"And you must be Mr Kent," Derrick Renouf said. "I've seen the posters."

Clark shook the businessman's proffered hand.

Renouf indicated the woman beside him. "May I introduce Mrs Schoenmakers? Lois Lane. Clark Kent. Reporters with the Daily Planet."

Mrs. Clark sensed Lois's investigative instinct snap to attention. "Pleased to meet you, Mrs Schoenmakers," he said.

"My sister," Renouf added.

His sister. Clark's gaze moved from one face to the other; the family resemblance was obvious. He glanced to Lois for her reaction - but she had already moved on.

"I believe Mr Calvin Montgomery contacted your office regarding a property in Metropolis," Lois said.

Renouf smiled affably. "And I believe you know that our company does not divulge private client information to reporters," he said smoothly. "Good day, Ms Lane. Mr Kent."

Derrick Renouf and his sister walked from the cafe. Lois sank into her chair.

Clark sat beside her. "Lois, would you -"

"Lois!" From the back of the cafe came an excited shriek. "Lo-Lo!"

Lois stood. Stared. Her grin broke out. "Julie?" she gasped. "Julie Wallace?"

"Yes!"

The two women hugged vigorously. When they separated, Lois was grinning widely. "I can't believe it," she said. "Julie Wallace!"

"Not for much longer," Julie said as she excitedly waved her left hand in front of Lois's face — a left hand adorned with a

sparkling engagement ring.

“You’re getting married?” Lois squealed.

Julie nodded. “Remember Dick Keaton?”

“Dick?”

“Yes! Dick Keaton! We’re going to be married next month.”

Lois hugged her friend again and then turned to Clark.

“Sorry, Clark,” she said. “This is Julie Wallace. We went to high school together. Julie, this is Clark Kent, my partner.”

“Your *partner*?” Julie asked with a meaningful hitch of her eyebrow.

“My work partner,” Lois explained quickly. “We’re reporters for the Daily Planet.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Julie said. “I remember hearing that. I don’t live locally in Metropolis anymore. I’m just here for a few hours to do some wedding shopping.” She flashed a smile at Lois. “Do you have some time, Lo-Lo? Lunch maybe? I’d love to catch up.”

Lois paused, looking tempted. “You stay, Lois,” Clark said. “I’ll go back to Perry and tell him the lead fizzled.”

“Are you sure? We were going to have lunch.”

“We can have lunch any day,” Clark said. He nodded to Julie. “Nice meeting you, Julie.” He dropped a five-dollar bill on the counter and stepped out of the cafe. He didn’t need superpowers to hear Julie’s next words.

“Are you sure he’s only your *work* partner?”

“He’s a friend, too,” Lois replied.

“Just a friend?” Julie persisted.

Clark continued walking away but he wasn’t able to overcome the temptation to listen to Lois’s answer. “A very good friend,” she said. “But a *friend*.”

“Is he married?”

“No.”

“Does he have a girlfriend?”

“No,” Lois said. “Why? You’ve got Dick.”

Clark heard Julie giggle. “Clearly you haven’t changed a bit, Lo-Lo,” she said. “So engrossed in your career, you haven’t even noticed the cute guy right next to you.”

“He’s a wonderful partner,” Lois said decisively. “And a true friend. We would be silly to risk that.”

Clark reeled back his hearing to normal levels as disappointment abraded his heart.

Attempts five and six: fail and fail.

3:03pm

Clark walked across the ground floor of the Daily Planet building — noting that the coffee boy was gone — and waited for the elevator, his mind completely occupied with questions about Lois.

Would she have returned from lunch with her friend?

Had the email problem been fixed?

Had she received his email?

When he’d arrived back at the office two hours ago, Perry had sent him out with Jimmy to cover the demolition of an old building. Despite the engineer’s profuse assurances that nothing could possibly go wrong — it had.

Which meant Clark had had to find enough cover to turn into Superman and then remove the debris from the neighbouring building — where it had no right to be. Even with super-speed, it had taken over an hour before he’d felt confident the area was safe.

Clark sighed as the elevator rose towards his floor. If Lois were back at her desk, perhaps he could tell her the story, and from there, it might be possible to squeeze an invitation into their conversation in a way that didn’t seem too clumsy.

The elevator opened. Lois’s desk was vacant. Clark skimmed the room, looking for her familiar figure.

She wasn’t here.

His heart shrivelled a little.

He went into Perry’s office, and the editor looked up. “How did it go?” he asked.

“Good — in terms of the story,” Clark replied. “Not so good in terms of a successful demolition.”

“What happened?”

“Despite all the planning, a fair proportion of the debris from the demolished building fell on the factory next to it.”

Perry was immediately concerned. “Anyone hurt?”

“No — they’d had the sense to evacuate the factory, although the engineer had assured everyone that it wasn’t necessary. Superman turned up and cleared away the rubble from the factory.”

“Did Jimmy get photos?”

“Yeah. He should be developing them now. I’ll go and write it up.” Clark stepped towards Perry’s door, and then, as if in afterthought, added, “Where’s Lois? Still with her friend?”

“No,” Perry replied. “She got another call from Bobby Bigmouth about Calvin Montgomery and why he’s in Metropolis.”

“She’s gone out?” Clark asked. “By herself?”

“She said it was nothing. Nothing dangerous.”

“And you *believed* her?”

Perry nodded easily. “You worry too much, Clark. She’ll be fine.”

“Where did she go?”

“She didn’t say,” Perry said.

Clark left the editor’s office. When he reached his desk, he called Lois’s cell phone.

“Lois Lane.”

Good. She was safe. “Hi Lois, it’s Clark.”

“Hi, Clark,” she said cheerfully. “What’s up?”

I’ve been trying to ask you out all day.

I was disappointed when I got in, and you weren’t here.

I was concerned when I heard you’d gone out alone.

I just want two uninterrupted minutes with you to ask if you would go on a date with me.

“Nothing,” Clark said. “I was ... ah ... just wondering if you got anything concrete for your story.”

“Nothing yet,” she said. “It was supposed to be a meeting between two men known to have links with Montgomery’s companies on the West Coast, but when I got here, it was two men with a vague likeness to them.”

“Tough luck,” Clark said, hoping his sympathy would survive the telephone connection.

“How did your story go?”

Now was not the time to gloat. “Fine. I’m about to write it up.”

There was silence for a moment. Then Lois said, “Was there anything else, Clark?”

She had just gifted him the perfect opening. All he had to do was say the words. *Would you go out with me?* Except he wanted to be able to see her face. If she declined, he had to know if she meant ‘no, never’ or ‘no, not now’. And if she accepted, he had to know if it were ‘yes, I’d love to’ or ‘yes, because I don’t know how to decline without hurting you like I did in the park that day.’

“No, nothing else,” Clark said dejectedly. “See you when you get back.”

“I’ll be there soon. I’m in the cab now.”

Clark sighed as he settled at his desk. Attempt seven ... It didn’t rate as an attempt. But the result was the same. Fail.

3:18pm

The email server was working again. Clark stared at his screen, glumly reading the announcement that emails had been lost in the crash. His email had been lost — dissolved to nothing

— just like all his attempts to ask Lois for a date.

His hearing locked onto her heartbeat. She was crossing the ground floor, walking past the cafe and to the elevator. He straightened his tie, adjusted his glasses, and ran a hand through his hair. He took a deep, steady breath and waited, poised for her arrival.

The moment she came in — regardless of her possible frame of mind, regardless of how eager she was to begin writing — he was going to ask her out.

He was going to say, “Lois, I need to speak with you. I want to ask if you would go out with me on a date.”

She stepped into the elevator. It began cranking through the levels.

This would be his moment.

Then he heard the sound that savaged all of his intentions. A police siren. And the police radio. He listened. A multi-car pile-up on the Port Bridge; the front car pushed into the barrier.

Clark sprang from his desk and reached the stairs just as the elevator doors opened. He really didn’t want to have to face Lois and be forced to stammer out another pathetic excuse for running away.

Ten seconds later, Clark — now dressed as Superman — hovered above the bridge. His eyes darted along the row of crumpled cars, x-raying through their roofs to check on the occupants. Finding no serious injuries, he swept over the water below. No cars had fallen from the bridge, and only one was in any danger of doing so — the sporty blue convertible at the front of the line.

Clark dropped down and gently eased it away from the mangled barrier. He moved to the driver’s window and found himself face to face with the coffee boy.

“Superman,” the kid said. “What took you so long? Surely you weren’t sulking over our little squabble this morning?”

It occurred to Clark that if this kid had let Lois pass by unhindered all those hours ago, his question could have been asked and answered by now. “I didn’t know it was you when I pushed the car back onto the road,” he said, deliberately being obscure as to whether this information would have resulted in a different outcome.

“Apology accepted,” the kid chirped.

Clark bit back every one of the uncharitable comments that crowded into his mind. “Are you hurt?” he inquired coolly.

“Yes,” the boy said. “My hair is ruined. I don’t suppose you carry emergency supplies of matte texturiser, do you?”

“What?”

“Matte texturiser. Surely you use it. I don’t know anyone who would be seen in public -”

“Are you hurt?”

The coffee boy consulted his flashy gold watch. “I’m going to be late,” he wailed. “I have an important event this evening. It starts in four hours, and it’s going to take ages to clear this road.” His eyes turned on Superman. “You could help,” he said. “You could fly me home. This is a crisis. It’s crucial I look my absolute best, and -”

Superman suddenly realised that in order to untangle the vehicles most efficiently, he should definitely start at the other end of the line. He turned away from the blue convertible and flew in the opposite direction.

4:24pm

Clark tapped his foot impatiently, wondering how much damage he would cause if he pushed the elevator upwards to get it there faster.

Lois was at her desk. He could hear her heartbeat. It was steady, relaxed.

This was his chance.

The doors slid open with agonising slowness, and Clark

marched out. Lois’s dark head was bent over her desk as she scribbled notes on a piece of paper.

He ran through a quick rehearsal in his mind. She looked up. She met his eyes. She smiled. Clark felt his spirits lift a notch.

“Hi, Clark,” she said, leaning back in her chair.

“Hi, Lois.” *Get straight to the point*, he told himself. *Don’t risk being interrupted.* “I’ve been wondering -”

“Lois!”

Her head spun to where Perry was storming out of his office, heading straight for them. Clark stared at his editor with abject disbelief.

“Yes, Chief?” Lois said.

“Do you have plans for this evening?” Perry asked.

“Ah ... no, I don’t.”

“Oh, good,” Perry said, looking relieved. “Cat just called in. She’s come down with a cold, and she can’t make the charity ball tonight.”

“You want us to go?” Lois asked with a slight nod in Clark’s direction.

“No,” Perry said. “Just you. Jimmy’s going.”

“You want Lois to go with Jimmy?” Clark said with squeaky incredulity.

“The Daily Planet bought two tickets,” Perry said. “It’s for the children’s hospital.”

“Can’t Ralph go?” Clark said, fully aware he was sounding downright cantankerous now. “Or Carl?”

Perry’s eyebrow arched. “It’s a ball,” he said. “Dancing. It’s customary for a woman to accompany a man.”

Suddenly, Clark had a great idea. A charity ball wasn’t exactly his idea of a perfect first date, but if he could be with Lois, nothing else mattered. “Does Jimmy want to go?” he asked. “It doesn’t sound like his sort of thing.”

“Ah.” Perry tapped his nose. “By sending along a photographer, I’m guaranteeing the Daily Planet the best fashion photos for the social pages.”

That explained why Cat had been supposed to go. “Lois is an investigative reporter,” Clark said. “She doesn’t write the social pages.”

Perry turned to Lois. “Would you mind?” he asked. “The board feels it is important that we are seen to be supporting local charities — and there’s none more worthwhile than the children’s hospital.”

Clark felt shame burn through him. Perry was right. This was for the kids.

“Sure, I’ll go,” Lois said with a small smile.

“Thanks, Lois,” Perry said, grinning. “And there *might* be a story in it.”

“What?” she said with immediate interest.

“Well, I heard a whisper that Calvin Montgomery bought tickets.”

“Really?” Lois said, beaming. “Perhaps he likes to dance. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve conducted an interview on the dance floor.”

Clark groaned in silent dismay. He had hoped Lois would be on a date with him tonight. Instead, she would be dancing with some extravagantly rich guy from out-of-town.

“It starts at eight o’clock,” Perry told Lois. “At the Regency Rooms. Do you want Jimmy to pick you up?”

Clark faded away to his desk. He turned on his computer and stared at the screen, wishing he could blur out the rest of the conversation. But he couldn’t. Perry gave Lois the details; she jotted them down.

And every one of them felt like acid disappointment burrowing through his insides.

“Can I leave now?” Lois asked. “I need to arrange an outfit.”

“OK,” Perry said. “I’m hoping Clark has brought me back something after disappearing an hour ago.”

“Pile-up on the Port Bridge,” Clark said woodenly. “No serious injuries. Superman freed the cars and cleared the road.”

Lois shut down her computer and picked up her bag. “Tell Jimmy I’ll be ready by 7:45,” she said.

Clark’s gaze followed her as she walked away. The elevator doors opened. Lois stepped in.

She turned. She looked in his direction.

Their eyes met.

The doors closed. His hopes lay in a shattered heap.

Attempt eight: the final failure. ***

7:05pm

Clark had met with Perry to discuss the draft of his weekend feature. He had submitted the story of Superman’s rescue on the bridge.

Then he’d shut down his computer, pushed in his desk chair, mournfully contemplated Lois’s deserted work space, and walked slowly home, his mind snagged a few blocks away where Lois would be preparing for her date with Jimmy.

Clark liked the young kid a lot, but Jimmy going out with Lois sat like flyblown meat in his gut.

At his empty apartment, Clark slumped onto his sofa and tried to convince himself that he should cook a meal. But he wasn’t hungry. The television remote control sat within reach but he ignored it. He needed to think.

He needed to push through the cloud of despondency and plan for tomorrow.

How did you ask your best friend on a date?

How did you attempt to guide a friendship to the threshold of something more?

What did Lois want?

Did she think about him that way?

Had she ever thought of him as a *man*, and not just a male person?

He was certainly aware of her as a woman. A very beautiful woman. Hot. Sexy. Stunning. Brilliant. Talented.

He remembered the anguish of her rejection in the park. That had hurt. Really, really hurt.

Did she still feel that way? Did she still ‘love’ him, but only as a friend? Had there been any shift in her feelings for him? Had she accepted his lie — that he *hadn’t* been in love with her?

Clark didn’t know ... and not knowing was driving him crazy.

He had to ask her out.

And if she refused ... well, at least he would know where he stood.

But how was he going to get it done?

He had tried all day but every single attempt had been thwarted before he’d reached the question mark.

Right now, she was probably dressing for her date.

With Jimmy.

All Clark wanted was the chance to say six words to her. Seven, if he added her name.

Lois, would you go out with me?

What would she wear tonight? She would look beautiful; he knew that. Was she excited by the thought of a big occasion? Was she relishing the chance to dress up?

Would she — even for a second — be disappointed that he, Clark, wouldn’t be with her?

If only he’d found a chance to ask her. If only she’d accepted his invitation. Then, perhaps he would be dressing right now: choosing a suit, knotting the new purple and gold tie he had bought especially for the occasion, dabbing on aftershave, polishing his shoes, combing his hair ...

... and praying no one would need Superman.

Clark hauled himself to his feet.

Superman.

If Clark Kent couldn’t be Lois’s date, at least Superman should go out and patrol.

Was it wrong to hope for an emergency — nothing that hurt anyone, of course, but something that would take his mind from Lois and her date with Jimmy Olsen?

He spun into the Suit and leapt from the balcony into the dark Metropolis night.

9:24pm

Clark hadn’t meant it. In fact, he had pushed away the idea every time it had elbowed its way into his mind.

But, despite his best intentions, he was here.

Above the Regency Rooms.

Within one glance of spying on Lois.

He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t. He had made a commitment that he would never use his powers to intrude on another’s privacy.

He forced himself to look across the glistening lights of the city, searching for anything that would distract him from what was happening below him.

His eyes volleyed back, lured like metal to a strong magnet.

Then his brain tossed up an idea.

Clark Kent couldn’t go to the charity ball uninvited. But Superman could. Every charity event welcomed Superman. He had hundreds of invitations every week.

He could walk in and check on Lois. It wouldn’t be spying. Everyone would see him. That wasn’t spying.

Clark landed at the door of the Regency Rooms.

He strolled into the foyer in his steady Superman stride.

The security guards at the door to the ballroom smiled with delight and gestured for him to enter.

He did.

The huge, majestic room was bustling with people.

Music from the band augmented the exuberant atmosphere. The dance floor was crowded with couples having a good time.

Where was Lois?

Was she having a good time?

Had she given him one thought?

Then he saw her.

On the dance floor.

In the arms of the coffee boy.

Part 3

9:29pm

Lois stiffened against the clammy pressure of Jed Montgomery’s hand as he tried to cinch her closer to his body.

Who would have thought that he was not only a libido-infested ego masquerading as a man, but the son of Calvin Montgomery masquerading as a coffee boy?

He had converged on her at the announcement of the first set, informing her that he had earmarked his first dance for her.

Thankfully, it had been before Jimmy had bolted to follow up his over-dinner appraisals of the young women present, so Lois had been able to inform Jed Montgomery that *her* first dance was earmarked for her date.

But, as Lois had realised the moment she’d recognised him across the room and inquired as to his identity, this was too good an opportunity to pass up. There had to be a reason behind Calvin Montgomery’s sudden, temporary, and unpublicised move to Metropolis. And there had to be a reason why the heir to the second biggest inheritance in the United States was working at a coffee booth on the ground floor of the Daily Planet building.

Relying on his persistence, she had sidestepped his next two approaches before finally allowing him to engulf her in his clunky grip.

Within moments, she’d made a discovery — although it was more a confirmation than a discovery. Jed Montgomery’s favourite topic was Jed Montgomery.

That could be advantageous, assuming she could bite her tongue long enough to loosen his.

What wasn't so promising was the realisation that his preoccupation with himself stretched only as far as which fashion labels best suited his tall, elegant frame.

Those were his words; Lois would have described him as 'gangly'. Although the longer she listened to his blather, the closer her rating slipped to 'puny'.

And which hair products he had sampled, detailing the relative merits of each one.

Lois idly wondered how much time, money, and effort it took to make his hair look as if he had just tumbled from bed after a rough night.

And whether ties with floral designs and pastel colours were indicative of a man being on the cutting edge of style or a sign that his assessment of the prevailing winds of fashion was fatally flawed.

Lois let him talk, murmuring only occasional responses. Not that Jed seemed to notice her ennui; he simply kept talking, secure in his belief that he was both rivetingly interesting and accurately informed.

Her thoughts turned to Clark.

What had he been planning for them tonight?

Probably not something as exclusive as this charity ball.

Probably a quiet meal somewhere. Just the two of them.

But even if he'd been going to suggest a pizza and video in his apartment, it would have been preferable to being carted around a dance floor by a trumpeting show pony.

Lois pinned her eyes to the point of Jed's shoulder. Perhaps it would be more bearable if her mind whisked her away. Imagine if she were dancing with ...

Clark.

Yes.

No.

No imagination on earth could be powerful enough to trick her into believing she was dancing with Clark.

The coffee boy's voice was whiny and self-absorbed. Nothing like Clark's warm tones — filled with humour or compassion or understanding or gentle teasing.

His scent was cloying. Nothing like Clark's subtle aroma that always reminded her of the freshness of a new morning tinged with a hint of sweet spice.

His grip was too tight. His long fingers reminded her of a birdcage, hemming her in. Nothing like Clark's light hand resting on her back — a touch that felt like freedom ... but safety, too.

No amount of imagination was ever going to transform Jed Montgomery into Clark Kent.

Lois glanced into the coffee boy's face, checking to see if he had moved on to any topic that could be relevant to a story.

No — he hadn't.

But he did catch her eye. And his mouth ground to a halt mid-sentence, cutting off his verbose description of his designer socks.

"So, Jed," Lois said, deftly manoeuvring into the crack of silence left in the wake of his sudden suspicion that his dance partner hadn't been hanging on his every word. "Why is a young man like you working at a coffee booth?"

"Because my father has archaic ideas about 'starting at the bottom'," Jed replied without hesitation. "He threatened to halve my allowance unless I stick it out for three months." He winked, making Lois want to recoil. "But there are compensations — other than keeping my full allowance, of course, which is imperative to adequately maintaining my image. There are a lot of very sophisticated, very beautiful women who work in that building."

"Do you tell them you're Jed Montgomery?" Lois asked, wondering how she had managed to miss that piece of

information when she'd been researching his father.

"No," he said. "My father insisted that I use my middle name and my mother's maiden name. But it doesn't matter. I don't need to flaunt my father's billions in order to attract any woman I want."

"Where is your father tonight? I heard he was going to be here."

"Nah," Jed drawled. "He bought some tickets because it's for charity. But he refuses to go out socially unless my mother accompanies him. She flew home yesterday to be with her mother who is recovering from minor surgery."

"Why move to Metropolis?" Lois asked. "I'm sure there must be coffee shops on the West Coast."

"My father wanted to take me out of my comfort zone," Jed said, rolling eyes inside lashes that looked artificially blackened. "He wanted me to 'make my own way'. Of course, with my looks and contemporary fashion sense, it was inevitable I would make a big splash in this sleepy old town."

Lois studied the young face, looking for even the slightest suggestion that he was less than serious. There was nothing. She hauled her thoughts back to the story. As tempting as it was to take Jed Montgomery down a peg or two, the story was more important. "But that doesn't explain why your father had to come," she said. "I'm sure he is an extremely busy man."

"He has these quaint little philosophies," Jed said airily. "Like — if something is important to him, he always does it himself. So, he's here, cramping my style and subjecting me to daily interrogation in his mission to ensure that I experience a regular job."

"Surely a man with your father's contacts could make good use of his time here," Lois said casually. "A big business deal perhaps? Or a company takeover?"

"Nope," Jed said. "Nothing like that. All this disruption to our lives is simply his ridiculous overreaction to my contention that I need the full-time services of a grooming specialist and fashion consultant." He sighed. "Sometimes old people have such warped understanding of what is important."

"Perhaps he's trying to teach you a valuable lesson," Lois said tightly.

Jed's face twisted to a wide smirk. He bent lower, almost asphyxiating her with the stench of his cologne as he whispered in her ear, "I could teach *you* some lessons later, sweetheart."

Lois lurched from his hold. He grappled for her. His feet became entangled in hers, and Lois felt herself stumble and fall. Strong arms caught her.

Steadied her.

Unhurriedly placed her on her feet.

"Are you all right, Ms Lane?" Superman asked.

Lois nodded. "Yes," she said. "Thank you."

"Then would you care to dance?" he asked without even fleeting acknowledgement to the ungainly efforts of the coffee boy to scramble up from the floor.

"That would be nice," Lois said. "Thank you."

"Are you really all right?" Superman asked softly against her ear as they began to glide effortlessly across the dance floor.

"Yes," she said. "But you saved me from a lot more than the embarrassment of a tumble."

"Oh?"

"I was in danger of suffocating in that kid's ego."

"He didn't take liberties?" Superman asked dourly.

Lois scanned the superhero's face. "Clark told you, didn't he?" she said. "About this morning?"

"We decided that because Clark has to walk past the coffee booth every day, it would be better if I had a few words with the young man."

"Did you know he's Jed Montgomery, Calvin Montgomery's son?"

“No. But it doesn’t matter who he is. He’s not going to harass you.”

Lois smiled. “Thank you,” she said. “But as I told Clark, I don’t need help to deal with a testosterone-overdosed teenager who is labouring under the erroneous belief that his opinions about himself are universal.”

Superman nodded slightly — which Lois knew to mean that the subject was closed for now but if Jed Montgomery crossed the line, he would be dealing with something even more unyielding than his own vanity.

The music stopped, and Superman’s arms fell away. “Another dance?” he asked.

Lois shook her head. “I can’t monopolise you,” she said. “But thank you for saving me.” She grinned. “Again.”

“Perhaps we could have another dance later,” Superman said.

“No,” Lois said. “I know it’s still early, but I’m tired. I think I’ll go.”

“I’ll see you safely home,” he offered.

A woman approached them, her eyes wide and fixated on Superman.

“No, thanks,” Lois said. “I’ll be fine. Now that you’re here, all the women are going to want to dance with Superman.”

Lois collected her bag, made an excuse to Jimmy — who was so engrossed in dancing with a young blonde that he probably wouldn’t have noticed his date’s absence — and headed for the door.

9:53pm

Clark was still watching Lois when a woman took his hand, and before he knew what was happening, they were swirling around the dance floor together.

He tried to make conversation with his dance partner as his eyes followed Lois until she had left the ballroom. He watched her through the wall as she hailed a cab and climbed in.

Was she all right?

She had passed up the opportunity to dance with Superman.

Had Jed Montgomery put her on the trail of a story? Something about his father?

Was she going to get herself into trouble?

Clark wanted to get away. He needed to make sure Lois arrived home safely.

But, conscious that he had come to the charity ball solely for his own purposes, he felt an obligation to stay long enough to dance with a few women.

Half an hour later, he heard a distant siren, made his excuses, and departed from the warm, convivial atmosphere of the ballroom.

The siren was a fire truck heading to a small house fire.

Superman blew out the fire with one breath, checked the owners — who were a little shaken but otherwise unhurt — and rose from the scene.

He flew to Lois’s apartment.

Her window was dark. Her apartment was silent.

Where was she?

He flew to the port area and surveyed the huge imposing homes that overlooked the water. A smattering of lights flickered in a few windows, but it seemed like a quiet, uneventful night.

But when Lois Lane was on the trail of a story, anything was possible.

Slowly rotating, Clark tuned in his ears.

Then, he detected it — her heartbeat.

Coming from ...

He darted across the dark Metropolis sky.

Coming from ...

... his apartment.

What was Lois doing in *his* apartment?

He dropped to the ground, spun into his Clark clothes, and

went to his door. He unlocked it and slipped inside. “Lois!” he said in surprise as he turned. “Is everything all right?”

She rose from the sofa and padded in her stockinged feet to meet him at the bottom of his short flight of stairs. “Would you believe the coffee boy is none other than Jed Montgomery, son of Calvin Montgomery?” she said.

“He is?” Clark said. “Was he at the ball?”

“Yeah,” Lois said. “That must have been what he was trying to ask me this morning.”

“Were you able to find out why his father came to Metropolis?”

“According to Jed, the second richest man in America is here to teach his son some life lessons about the value of money.”

“That’s why he’s working at the coffee booth?”

“Yeah.” They sat down together on Clark’s sofa. Lois shrugged. “I’ll do some checking tomorrow, but my instinct is that the story is nothing more than a concerned father trying to give his son a taste of the real world.” She grinned. “And I am *not* going to give Jed Montgomery the satisfaction of featuring in a Lois Lane story.”

“You did a lot of research for it to peter out to nothing,” Clark said, risking a brief touch to her arm. Then he remembered what she’d said about friends touching and quickly withdrew his hand.

Silence fell. The pressure inside Clark mounted. This was his chance. He was alone with Lois. She hadn’t told him why she’d come to his apartment but her mood seemed conducive to an invitation.

Except ...

If he asked her now, and if she said ‘no’, she would leave to escape the resulting awkwardness.

And, Clark realised, after his day of frustration, all he really wanted was to spend some time relaxing with Lois. “Would you like a drink?”

“No, thanks,” she said.

Did that mean she wasn’t thirsty? Or she was about to leave? She seemed to have settled into his sofa. “You left the ball early,” he said lightly. “I thought those sorts of occasions extended long past midnight.”

“I’d had enough,” Lois said lethargically.

“Was the coffee boy giving you trouble?”

“No,” Lois said. “Not once Superman arrived.”

She’d danced with Superman. But she’d left him. To come here. Why was that? “Superman was there?” Clark asked, remembering to infuse his question with a sprinkling of surprise.

“Yeah. I was dancing with the Montgomery kid, and he almost tripped me up. Superman saved me from landing rather inelegantly on my butt.” Her expression sharpened a little, and Clark tensed. “You told Superman what happened this morning, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” he admitted.

To Clark’s considerable relief, Lois chuckled. “You know, I don’t need either you or Superman to look after me. I can deal with a kid by myself, regardless of how zeroes he has on his allowance.”

“You seemed a bit agitated when you walked in this morning,” Clark said, remembering it had been the first barricade in what had become a day of roadblocks.

“So you thought a quiet word from Superman might help?”

Clark nodded, trying to gauge her level of annoyance at his interference.

“Why didn’t you talk to him yourself?” Lois asked.

“Because I thought Superman might have more impact,” he replied.

“You underestimate yourself sometimes, Clark Kent,” Lois said, her tone humming with something he couldn’t quite identify.

“I’ve never thought that Clark Kent could be much like

Superman.”

“You don’t have to be exactly like him to be just as effective,” Lois said.

The atmosphere had turned serious. Sweet serious. Sucking the oxygen from the room. Clark stared at his hands as his heart thumped.

Was this his moment? Should he ask her? Now?

Lois sprang to her feet. “Let’s go out,” she said.

Clark slowly stood. “Out?”

“Well, I’m all dressed up, and I’m not tired at all. So ... how about some hot chocolate?”

Hot chocolate sounded ... *Anything* with Lois sounded wonderful.

“We could go to that chocolate place near Centennial Park,” she said eagerly. “What do you say?”

“Great,” Clark said. He paused a moment to take in her outfit.

“You look sensational, Lois. I ... Excuse me a moment.” He hurried into his bedroom. As soon as he was out of her sight, he flew around the room, spinning into black pants, a black shirt, and a grey jacket. He paused in front of the mirror, torn between the need to appear normal and his eagerness to get back to Lois.

He gave up and walked out of his bedroom.

Lois put her bag on her shoulder. She smiled, and together, they walked up the stairs. At the top, Clark stopped. The world outside could be teeming with distractions. Hundreds of them. All lying in wait to sabotage his efforts.

“Lois, would you go out with me?”

They both stopped as if caught in a freeze frame.

He frantically studied her face as he swallowed loudly. “I mean on a date,” he said. “Would you go out with me on a real date? Tomorrow evening?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

Clark wanted to seize his prize and run, but he had to be sure there was no misunderstanding. “Lois, I’m not talking about two colleagues catching a bite to eat,” he said. “I’m not talking about two friends hanging out together after work.”

“I know,” she said.

“And you’d still like to come?”

Her smile confirmed his hope. “I’ve been waiting to say ‘yes’ all day.”

Clark’s mouth gaped. “You knew?”

She put her hand on his arm. “It seemed as if everything was conspiring against us having a few quiet minutes together,” she said.

Realisation illuminated his mind. “Is that why you came here?”

“Yep.”

She’d left Superman to come to Clark. She’d left a glitzy ball to come to his apartment to give him the chance to ask her out for a date.

Words were suddenly proving elusive, but Clark knew his smile was shining like a beacon.

“How many times did you try?” Lois asked. “Five? Six?”

“Eight,” he admitted.

“Aww, Clark,” she said. A spray of amusement lit her lovely brown eyes. “Starting with a coffee boy ...”

“Perry.”

“Jimmy.”

“Old friends.”

“Phone calls.”

“Stories.”

“Charity balls.”

“Lost emails.”

Lois eyed him with laughing surprise. “You *emailed* me, asking for a date?”

“Not exactly,” Clark said, shuffling to try to hide his discomfort. “I mentioned that I would *like* to ask you for a date. So you could be prepared.”

“How much preparation did you think I’d need?” she asked, her smile imbued with a touch of teasing.

“I ...” He didn’t want to admit he’d been so scared she would refuse. “I did ask you,” he said. “Well, I suggested you tell the coffee boy you were going out with me.”

“I had to know it was what you really wanted,” Lois said. “Not just something you did out of your over-developed sense of chivalry.”

“Lois,” he said solemnly. “I have wanted this for a long time.”

She put her hand on his cheek. Her eyes slid down and hovered on his mouth, and for one wildly improbable moment, Clark thought she was going to kiss him.

She laughed, breaking them out of the moment. “This is all Jed Montgomery’s fault,” she said. “He messed up everything this morning, and it took us all day to get back on track.”

“We were diverted by a powdered, primed, puffed-up, pompous, pubescent playboy,” Clark said with feigned disgust.

Lois chuckled. “He’s not here now.” Her laughter faded.

Clark swallowed.

Her eyes captured his.

She reached up, coming closer.

He watched her, mesmerised, hardly able to breathe.

She placed a kiss to his mouth.

Directly onto his mouth.

Her lips lingered against his. Only for a moment.

But that moment more than compensated for every ounce of frustration Clark had endured.

When he opened his eyes, Lois was smiling. “Come on,” she said, nestling her hand in crook of his arm. “Let’s get some hot chocolate.”

Clark followed her out of his apartment as joy and excitement danced a duet across his heart.

He’d asked her! He’d *finally* asked Lois out!

And she’d said, “Yes.”

Attempt nine. Success at last!

THE END