

# This Is Not a Date

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Story Summary: Celebrating her latest story success, Lois meets a handsome stranger in a bar, a stranger who has come to Metropolis to interview for his dream job. It's not a date... but could it be fate?

Story Size: 10,552 words (58Kb as text)

**Author's Note:** So... there was this meme... from @misskatiecharm on twitter that said "Even if you are fully vaccinated, the CDC warns that you should not put your hand on women's lower backs when you want to get past them in bars."

And then I shared it with FoLC friends and quipped: Yeah, unless you're Clark and she's Lois.

Because... I'm a total sucker for that thing he does, putting his hand on the small of her back. An absolute sucker. It gets me every time. Every time.

And then this happened...

AnnieM: To be fair, it doesn't say you shouldn't do that to your girlfriend/wife. Random dudes in bars can step off!

Me: Except now I want a fic about Clark being a random dude in a bar and doing that accidentally... like his hand was drawn there almost. And she reads him the riot act and then they hit it off.

AnnieM: 10/10 would read.

Me: Well... shoot.

Not surprisingly, this ended up longer than I anticipated when I was just laughing around about the idea. And it also — again, not surprisingly — got more emotional than I thought it'd be. But, oh! It was ever so fun to write.

Thanks, as always, to my ever-constant BR and partner in crime, lovetvfan — I always love your comments and suggestions and encouragement, and thanks for coming up with the *perfect* line when I was stuck again! And... apparently... I accidentally kidnapped KathyB, threw her into the Google Doc... and poof — she's a BR! I didn't mean to hijack your time, but I'm soooooo happy to have had your help and insights! Something similar happened with AnnaBtG, but I think she *asked* to be thrown in? I'm slightly unclear because it was during a frenetic 2am writing spree. But regardless, their feedback and suggestions about the plot and emotional arc were invaluable and made the story so much better. It was all a bit... magical.

Thank you to GooBoo for a quick GE for the archive!

## Chapter 1

Lois sighed into her white wine as she leaned against the bar and ran her thumb along the burgundy lipstick stain on the rim of the glass. It was far too crowded for her tastes, and standing room only. Maybe this had been a dumb idea. She had no clue what to do at a bar, and she was bored out of her mind. It wasn't like she was trying to pick up a man; she'd had quite enough of men this past week.

She smoothed her free hand over the length of the black, strappy cocktail dress she'd worn tonight, wanting nothing more than to feel as feminine as possible after spending the last two weeks moonlighting as a scruffy man named Larry, boosting cars and finding out everything she could to bring down that million dollar car theft ring.

And she'd done it, of course. Never doubted she would. The bad guys were going to pay for their crimes, and she would have her 38-point headline on the front page tomorrow.

She'd had no one to go out and celebrate with — Jimmy was staying late to help Perry with something, Lucy was out of town for the week and didn't really understand her efforts or achievements as an investigative journalist anyway, and Lois just... really didn't have any friends to speak of.

But that was fine. It was fine. She didn't need anyone but herself. And she was perfectly capable of lauding her own accomplishments by herself. She was, after all, proud of her independence and ambition. She'd made it far in her career at quite a young age, and in a man's world to boot, and tonight she was going to celebrate her success.

She was Lois Lane, and she didn't need anyone. Still, it would have been nice to have someone around to celebrate with, someone who understood what drove her to be the best and why she did it.

But men? Yeah, she'd had enough of them after two weeks of being one and boosting cars with creeps who wouldn't know manners if they smacked them in the face. And oh, how she had wanted to, several times. The things men said about women when they didn't think any were listening were downright disgusting. She'd always known men were capable of being lowdown dirty scumbags, but witnessing it — and worse, participating in it — was a whole different thing.

She should probably just finish this glass and leave. Her robe and a pint of ice cream were sounding really good right about now, and she was pretty much done being jostled and bumped every time someone had to shove past her in the crowded bar.

Suddenly, she felt a large, warm hand on the small of her back and she froze. A bolt of irritation flooded her and she made her voice low and intense. "Hands off, buddy."

She clenched her jaw and readied herself for a terrible pick up line or lewd comment or continued attempts at groping. But there was none of that, just a rich but hesitant voice saying, "Sorry, miss. I'm terribly sorry. It was an accident." And somehow, the hand had disappeared from her back so fast she was starting to wonder if it'd actually been there in the first place.

She rolled her eyes and sighed again, turning around to face the man who was surely putting on an act in order to pick her up. “Yeah,” she said flatly. “I’m sure your hand just accidentally made its way to my lower... back.” Oh God, he was gorgeous. Please don’t be a creep. Please don’t be a creep.

“Can I buy you a drink to make it up to you?” he said with a sheepish look he had to have practiced in the mirror.

And there it was. The line. She sighed inwardly. She’d heard this whole setup before. It was straight out of the playbook. At least he wasn’t a groper she had to deal with despite the initial touching. “I have a drink already. Thanks.” She hated adding thanks and the half-smile she gave him, but she’d learned the hard way that if you didn’t play the role of politely flattered woman when you turned them down, things could get ugly quickly.

The tentative grin he flashed at her made her breath catch, but then his next words belied that hesitant air he was going for. “Your next drink, then?”

If persistence weren’t annoying when trying to let a guy down easy, she’d give him points. “Look, I’m not really here to pick up a man or anything tonight.”

He put his hands up cautiously. “I’m not either. I mean... to pick up a woman. I’m not here for that. I just...” he trailed off. Clearly there was some actual nervousness there that she hadn’t given him credit for, something in his eyes...

“Okay, sure. I believe you. But still, I’m fine, thanks. Don’t worry about it.” She waved a hand in the air and sighed again, frustrated with the extra annoyance and trying really hard to ignore the way his eyes looked like rich chocolate behind his glasses.

“Are you sure, miss?” he asked and then hesitated before his next words. “I just... I’d hate for you to get the wrong idea about me. My mother taught me to be respectful. I can pay the bartender and let her know it’s for you, and then I’ll be on my way. I wasn’t suggesting you were required to have a drink with me. Honest.”

“Oh, I...” Well, that was... disarming. She wasn’t sure what to say. It wasn’t a pickup line or a practiced move after all. He seemed... genuine. And he was already getting out his wallet and getting closer to the bar, but he was also hanging back, as if still seeking her permission and not wanting to overstep. “You’re not from around here, are you?” she asked, full of curiosity.

He let out an airy chuckle. “I’m that obvious?”

“No one in Metropolis is that nai — that polite.” She smiled at him despite herself.

“I’m only in town for a couple of days for a job interview. Maybe do some touristy things. Then again, if all goes well, I’ll stay, of course. I’m really hoping it goes well.” There was a slightly awkward pause as if he was wondering why he was sharing so much information with a stranger who had clearly not wanted his attention in the first place.

But now she kind of did. Want his attention.

“In any case,” he continued on, “let me know if you want the drink or not. Your choice, of course, and then I’ll stop bothering you.” He nodded somewhat resolutely, maybe to emphasize his sincerity or convince himself he

needed to stop babbling.

“I’ll make you a deal,” she said, almost surprising herself and definitely surprising him — his eyebrows went up, a hopeful look on his face. “I need to use the ladies’ room. If you can find us a place to sit...” She gestured around at the packed establishment they were in. “I’ll have that drink with you.”

Oh, oh my. That grin sure did light up his entire face. “Deal,” he said, his voice somehow a little bit velvety.

Lois swallowed down the small remainder of her wine and left the glass on the bar before she gave him one last smile and headed for the restroom in the back of the bar. It wasn’t likely that he’d get a spot. She wasn’t even sure what had made her say that. Was she wanting to test his persistence? Tease him? And why, all of a sudden, was she so willing to have a drink with a stranger? A handsome stranger. A very handsome stranger.

She took a deep breath and pushed open the door to the ladies’ room. After using the facilities and washing her hands, she took a moment to assess her reflection in the mirror. All the effort to look feminine tonight... a little thrill went through her at the thought that it wasn’t wasted. Not that she didn’t enjoy dressing up and doing her makeup for herself, but being a young, single woman, she’d be lying if she said she wasn’t open to the possibility of attracting a non-creep.

Dating, though... it was hard with her job. She had long and often erratic hours, which didn’t lend itself well to date nights and getting to know someone. On top of that, most men she’d met recently... well, they all seemed a little intimidated by her. Threatened, really.

She was young and successful. A woman at the top of her field, a field dominated by men. And men, no matter how progressive or feminist they claimed to be, just weren’t interested in a woman so ambitious and driven. Their loss, she knew. But that didn’t change the fact that dating prospects were few and far between, and among them, there wasn’t a lot of hope for something more.

But in any case, tonight wasn’t about finding someone to date. Tonight was about celebrating Lois Lane and her accomplishments. And if a handsome stranger wanted to have a drink with her, that was just a bonus. He said he was only in town for a few days anyway, so there was no harm in just having a nice time and talking. Definitely not about work. No need to scare him off when she just wanted to have an enjoyable evening and relax a little before diving into her next story. She never took a break from work; she deserved this.

After a quick touch-up of her lipstick, a hand through her hair, and adjusting her breasts in her dress, she gave herself one last look in the mirror. She looked amazing. And she was pretty sure that Handsome Stranger had thought so too. She headed back out to the main bar room and searched around.

Now that she’d talked herself into thoroughly enjoying the evening, she really hoped he hadn’t given up and left. But then, she worried when she didn’t find him right away, what if he hadn’t been able to find a table? Let’s face it, odds were really low that he would have been successful. This place was packed and she hadn’t seen any tables open

up all night. That's why she'd been standing at the bar in the first place.

She supposed, if he was still here, she could offer to go someplace else with him... though that wasn't always the safest choice, and it might sound too forward and give him the wrong idea. Oh, where was he?

"Hey!" There it was, that rich and velvety voice!

She looked around in the direction she thought she'd heard it, and then she saw him, waving at her with that 1000-watt smile on his face. He was standing in front of one of the small banquet booths for two along the wall opposite the bar. Her heart leapt at the sight. He'd gotten a table.

Now that she was further away from him, halfway across the room and walking toward him, she got a better look at him, and he was... even better looking than she'd initially thought. He was wearing dark-colored slacks and a plain, white button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and no tie, like he'd had an interview earlier but was now out to relax. Oh, she hoped he was as good of a conversationalist as he was pretty looking. Because having a great view during a boring conversation was still a boring conversation.

Her small purse clutched in both hands, she paused when she got to the table to give him a quick smile, and he gestured for her to have a seat. As she slid into the short booth, his hand hovered close to the small of her back for a half a second before he pulled his arm back sharply as if he hadn't even realized it'd gotten close. She caught his somehow startled expression and gave him a cautious look out of the corner of her eye.

He winced, and she wondered what he was thinking. "Sorry!" he said sheepishly as he slid back into his seat.

"I got you another white wine — the bartender poured what you had last," he said. His fingers played a bit anxiously at an extra cocktail napkin in the middle of the small table.

"Thank you," she said as she pulled the glass a little closer in front of her, taking a moment to revel in the sight of his dark hair, strong jaw, and what appeared to be an impressively maintained physique peeking out from underneath his shirt collar and sleeves.

"Not that I... I normally wouldn't presume to order for you! Given how busy it is, though, I figured it was a good bet and wouldn't have you waiting forever for your next drink. But if you want something else, I will absolutely go get it for you!"

"Has anyone ever told you that you babble?" She grinned at him.

He chuckled a bit self-consciously and ducked his head. The slight blush on his cheeks was devastatingly sexy. "Yeah," he admitted. "My mom says I tend to do that when I'm nervous."

"You're nervous. Why?"

"You're gorgeous," he blurted out on a breath. "Uh, forget I said that. I told you I wasn't here to pick up women and I'm doing nothing but fall all over you. I was just out for a quick drink and a bite to eat. I wasn't expecting to meet... If you change your mind, you can just kick me out of the booth. I'll leave you alone —"

Her hand on his halted him mid-babble, and he stared at her wide-eyed. "Thank you for the drink. And the compliment," she said softly.

"You're welcome," he said, visibly calmer now, though she did note him pausing to swallow hard before he took a sip of his beer using his free hand. His eyes flitted down to where her hand was still touching his, and she pulled it back gently and let it fall to her lap. Her palm was warm and tingly where it had touched the back of his hand.

"So... your offer for a different drink..."

"Anything! What would you like?" he said without hesitation.

"It's... well, the wine is perfect, actually, but given that I don't know you and I didn't see it made..."

"Oh! Of course! I'm so sorry. I should have thought of that!" He looked mighty chagrined for a second, but he quickly stood and picked up her glass. "I'll be right back, and I'll make sure you can see." His words and actions and that amazing smile all... well, they were almost unbelievable. Who was this handsome stranger?

She watched as he waited and then spoke with the bartender, angled his body to the side so that she could clearly see her pour the wine, and paid for a second glass of wine. It was endearing to see him carefully pick up the glass and walk back so that it wouldn't be out of her sight for even a moment.

"Here you are!" He smiled warmly as he placed the drink in front of her without fanfare and slid back into his seat across from her.

"Thank you. I appreciate it," she said with a shy smile, feeling a strange warmth and lightness in her heart she hadn't ever felt before.

"Of course," he said. "I don't want you to feel anything but comfortable with me... I mean, if that's all right to say."

She nodded and smiled gratefully at him, this man who didn't even need an explanation and paid for another glass of wine without a second thought. She took a sip of her wine — perfectly chilled, a crisp pinot grigio — and then she set down her glass. Her eyes went to his arms resting on the table, crossed loosely in front of him, his bare forearms making her feel a little flushed. Forearms were not supposed to be sexy, were they?

"So, do tell," she asked, a smile on her face. "How did you manage to snag a booth for us?"

He smiled again, the nervousness about him seeming to die down more with every passing second. "I charmed some middle-aged man into giving it up," he said.

"Ehhh. Try again. I can tell you're lying." She took another sip of wine and gave him a wry grin.

"I paid him fifty bucks."

Her jaw dropped. "Seriously?"

He nodded. "Seriously."

"But why?" She set her wine glass back down and leaned in closer, her ribs bumping gently against the edge of the table.

"An amazingly beautiful woman said I could buy her a drink if I got her a table. So I got her a table," he said simply.

For seconds, she couldn't breathe. Was this guy for real? He couldn't be real. "Are you real?" It slipped out before

she could help it.

“What?”

“Are you real? Like, not from Earth. Heaven sent.” She laughed at her own poor pickup line.

He let out a nervous chuckle. “I guess you’ll have to stick around and find out.”

Her heart fluttered excitedly at his words. “So where are you really from?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Her brow furrowed. Why did he look mildly panicked? “You’re in Metropolis for an interview. Where do you live?”

“Oh, right.” What had he thought she meant? “Kansas,” he said.

“Ahh, you’re a Jayhawk?”

“God, no!” he blurted out, then he winced. “I meant... no. Sorry. They were rivals.” He laughed to himself a little. “I went to Midwest U in Wichita. I was raised in a small farming town called... well, Smallville.”

She laughed. “That’s really the name?”

He nodded and smiled at her, clearly enjoying her amusement.

“So is that where you live? Smallville?”

“Yup.”

“On a farm.”

His eyes crinkled as his smile grew. “Yes. On a farm.”

“Welcome to the city, then, farmboy. Don’t let us eat you alive. You seem nice. It’d be a shame.”

“Thanks... I think,” he said, amused. “And really, I’m just living with my folks until I find a job, somewhere to settle.”

“Metropolis is a long way to come for an interview,” she said, not sure exactly what question she was asking.

“Well, I guess... technically they’re my mailing address more so than where I’m currently staying right now. I’ve been living abroad and traveling for a while now, but now that I’m back in the States for good, I set up about half a dozen or so interviews in bigger cities, hoping to settle down somewhere. This is the last interview on my multi-city tour, if you will, before I head back to Kansas.”

“So, you did a little more traveling after your travels?” she teased and he grinned at her. “Where all did you go on these travels?”

“Oh, all over, really. Paris, London, South Africa, Shanghai, Ireland, Spain. Other areas around Europe and Asia. And a lot of little places in South America. I think those were my favorite.”

“Oh, wow!” That was... a list. “Here, I was thinking you’d backpacked through Europe, trying to see the world a bit before you found a place to settle down. But that’s some pretty extensive traveling. Were you looking for a place to live or just exploring? How long were you traveling? Did you go alone? Didn’t you miss home? What made you choose those places?”

He was grinning at her and staring, a certain something in his eyes she couldn’t place.

“What?” She eyed him curiously.

“Nothing.” He shook his head and smiled again. “It’s just you accused *me* of babbling.”

Lois giggled self-consciously and ducked her head a

moment. “Yeah, that apparently tends to happen when I’m excited or worked up about something.”

“Well, it’s adorable,” he said with his velvety voice, but then he winced a bit as if he hadn’t meant to say it out loud. He looked contrite... and adorable.

“It’s okay,” she said softly and meaning it. Something about the way he looked at her, the way he talked to her... she didn’t want him to stop.

He smiled warmly back at her, visibly delighted that she’d said she didn’t mind. “So, let’s see...” he started off, and she was curious what he’d say next. “I was just exploring on my travels, though sometimes I’d stay in a place longer, work for four months or so to save up some money and experience the culture a bit more in depth. I did this on and off for about six years after college. By myself. And, yeah, I missed home, but I called and wrote and, uh... came back to the States to visit every so often. As for choosing where... I’m not sure. I just kind of bounced around or chose based on recommendations from other travelers I’d run into. I mean, obviously, the bigger places, like Paris, Dublin, Madrid, Egypt... those places I’d wanted to see ever since I was a kid.”

Wow. “You have great listening skills.” She laughed a little, impressed that he had not only remembered all her rapid-fire questions but answered in detail, and... that he was so well-traveled. “But wow, that sounds like... a real adventure! Fascinating, but... kinda lonely.” She couldn’t imagine traveling alone like that for so long. She might enjoy and value her independence, but she needed people around. She needed amenities. She needed the fast pace and heartbeat of the big city.

“It wasn’t so bad; I did it for years, after all.” He winked at her, though there was something else behind the mirth, and he paused to finish off the last bit of beer in his glass. “I love meeting new people and learning new things, experiencing different cultures. Almost every place I went, the people were welcoming and eager to show me everything about their land and culture.”

She marveled at the man in front of her as he chatted more about his travels. “I’ve never met anyone quite like you,” she said, the wonder spilling out in her voice before she could even think about whether to hold it in.

He smiled at her, and she worried a little that it was a sight she was quickly becoming addicted to. “Did you find what you were looking for?” she asked curiously, wondering at the hint of wistfulness, sadness that she’d sensed.

“What do you mean?”

“No one lives such a nomadic lifestyle without...” She looked down at her nearly empty wine glass. After a moment, she looked back up at him, and found him watching her, waiting patiently for her to finish her thoughts. “I don’t know... I just get the sense that you were trying to find something. So many different places...” She shrugged and shook herself a bit, pasting a smile back on her face. “I’m sorry, I’m not sure what I was trying to say. It sounds like a truly wonderful experience. I didn’t mean to make it sound otherwise.”

“You didn’t. It’s okay,” he said softly. “And... we’ll see. I have a good feeling about my interview tomorrow. And

then maybe I can settle down in Metropolis once and for all." Oh, that smile of his was dangerous.

She didn't want to talk about tomorrow and wonder if she'd ever see him again. Tonight was about... celebrating and enjoying the moment. "Oh, we're both empty!" she said, a little too brightly, indicating their glasses as she stood and gathered them up. "Next round's on me." She hesitated for a half a second. "Unless you want to see them pour it?"

He just smiled and said, "That's okay. I trust you."

With that strange new fluttering in her chest again, Lois wandered back up to the bar, which was easier to do now that much of the crowd had cleared out. She put the empties on the bartop as she looked over to catch the bartender's attention. The woman's eyes lit with recognition, and she smiled. "Another round?" she asked and Lois nodded. "How's it going with Mr. Perfect over there?"

Lois raised her eyebrows. "Mr. Perfect?"

She laughed as she readied their drinks. "Yeah. Seems like a real nice guy, like, an *actual* nice guy, especially to get you a re-pour no questions asked. *And* he tips well. Not to mention he's freaking gorgeous. Don't tell me you haven't noticed."

Lois flushed at the thought and the slight discomfort of talking about this with a stranger. "I noticed," she said, unable to keep the grin off her face. "Too bad he's from out of town."

"Honey, that's why they invented one-night stands." The woman chuckled at her and slid both drinks towards her. "Keeping the tab open or did you want to close it?"

Lois opted to close out her tab, collecting the receipt and credit card between her fingers in a way that she could still carry both glasses. "Thanks," she said to the bartender as she grabbed the drinks.

"No problem, hon. Hope you have a *really* good night," she said, throwing her a conspiratorial wink before moving down to her next customer.

Lois was trying hard not to let her mind follow that dangerous train of thought. It wasn't an option she was even considering, but oh God, was it tempting to think about.

He stood as she approached the table, as though he was doing that gallant chivalrous thing. Was that how it worked in Kansas all the time? She saw his arm move this time toward her lower back, and she raised an eyebrow at him to let him know that if his hand was moving without his permission again, he'd best get ahold of it. He gave her another sheepish look and slid back into the booth. She sat down as well, and as she had her head down and to the side to tuck her card and the receipt in her purse, she bit back a grin.

"So," she started as she straightened again and grabbed her wine glass, holding it up and toward him. "Let's make a toast."

"Okay," he agreed happily, grabbing his pint glass. "To what?"

"To... good luck on your interview tomorrow AND a congratulations to me on... finishing a big project at work!" She didn't really want to talk about work, but she *was* here to celebrate, darn it.

"Perfect." He clinked his glass against hers and took a

sip of his beer. "Congratulations," he said, and he put down his glass.

"Thank you," she said with a nod and a flourish before she took a sip of wine and set her glass down as well. "I love it when weeks and weeks of hard work pay off. I might even win an award for it."

"That's great!" He beamed at her. "You must be really good at what you do."

"I'm the best," she said confidently.

And she could tell by the look of admiration on his face that he knew she'd meant it without conceit but rather, with confidence and pride. His smile flickered for a moment, though.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. I'm just glad you're willing to let me share the evening with you."

She was struck by the sincerity in his voice, not a trace of disdain or pity that she was all dressed up and quite obviously here alone. "Well, I'm certainly glad for the company, even though I'm perfectly capable of celebrating on my own."

"I didn't have any doubts," he said softly, his eyes intense. "And I'm having a really great time. I hope you are too."

"I've never had a first date go this well," she blurted out. "I mean, not that this is a date! This is not a date. But..." She felt her cheeks flushing. How embarrassing.

"I can't imagine why they wouldn't go well," he said, so softly and earnestly that it didn't even sound like a line. In fact, other than the first few things he'd said to her, before she'd realized his charming naivete, nothing sounded like a line coming out of his mouth.

"Heh. That's what they all say."

"In fact, I'm really surprised to know that you don't have a boyfriend."

All those non-lines from his beautiful mouth. But she should probably tell him. Spare him the trouble in his future dating life. Things in Kansas couldn't be that different, could they? This amazing guy deserved a fair shot. "So... I'm pretty sure you don't realize, but some of the things you've said tonight are, um..." How did she put this delicately?

"Are what?" he asked, his eyes a little wide with a hint of panic. "Have I... if I've said anything to offend you, I'm so sorry."

She smiled and giggled a little at him, his attractive and unbeguiling way, and shook her head gently. "No, you definitely haven't. It's just there are many guys — too many — who think they're smooth-talking women when they say things like, 'I'm surprised you don't have a boyfriend,'" she told him and did her best to bite back the laughter at his look of realization.

He grimaced in the most adorable way, his shoulders shrugging slightly. "Sorry?"

Her laugh was airy and her cheeks were starting to hurt from smiling so much. "I assure you, it's fine." She tucked her hair behind her ear. "I should let you know that your Smallville manners at the beginning there? Well, it felt like it was straight out of the player's handbook."

"Seriously?" His eyebrows shot up. "I..." He ran a

hand through his hair, and she couldn't help but notice how his muscles bunched and settled even beneath the sleeves of his dress shirt. "That feels like being punished for being honest," he said, and she could hear the small measure of defeat in his tone. "I mean, I've obviously seen stuff like that in movies and television, witnessed a bit of the bar scene in college... but... that behavior was so *not* me that I didn't even consider..."

She gave him an engaging smile. "Well, don't worry. It's adorable. I just thought... you might want to be aware — if you weren't already — so the next girl you accidentally bump into doesn't think you're putting the moves on her." She winked at him and she could swear she saw a slight blush reappear on his cheeks.

For a moment, he looked at her intensely, his gaze smoldering, as though he wanted to say something... but whatever it'd been, he must have decided against it because his expression turned to a warm smile, and he said, "Well, thanks for giving me the time of day anyway. I'm sure glad you did." His voice was low and sincere, and it made her whole chest feel alive and tingling.

After several long moments, the captivating tension had dissipated, and they were back to friendly banter. But that was good. Wonderful. She loved the friendly banter.

And banter they did, for another two hours before either of them realized how much time had gone by. The conversation with him just seemed to... work, never running out of things to talk about even though they'd both playfully agreed not to mention her work or his interviews. Everything flowed like they'd been the best of friends for years, and every so often because she just couldn't stop herself (and he couldn't seem to either), the flirtatious tension would come around to set her heart racing and tingling all over only to slow back down to a simmer. It was like a roller coaster, the best roller coaster she'd ever been on, and she never wanted it to stop.

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## Chapter 2

He pointed at her empty glass. "Ready for another?"

"Nah, I think just water. You buying this round, farmboy?" she asked in a mock sultry tone, then bit at her lip a little to keep from giggling.

He barked with laughter and she couldn't help but join him. "I don't know. I don't actually have a job yet, you know," he teased back as he stood and grabbed their empty glasses. "But I guess I can get this one." He winked at her and then walked away.

She watched unabashedly, wishing that he'd chosen jeans instead of dark slacks, the dim lighting of the bar making it hard to see if his backside was as good looking as the rest of him. He had a brief but friendly looking conversation with the bartender before he returned with two waters, complete with ice and slices of lemon. It looked as though he was blushing again, and she wondered what the bartender had said to him. She bit back a laugh at the thought of it.

"Thanks," she said as he sat back down. She took a sip, and then a few long gulps, not realizing how parched she'd actually felt after all their talking. "Ahh."

"You're welcome." He slaked his thirst as well, and then

set his glass back down. Then he wagged his eyebrows at her and said in a schmaltzy tone. "So, do you come here often?"

She couldn't help but laugh even as she shook her head at him. "Are you trying to put the moves on me?" she asked, tilting her head slightly and looking at him from underneath her eyelashes.

"Maybe?" He grinned briefly at her, and he seemed to appraise her with his warm, chocolate eyes in a way that was admiring and almost reverent instead of wandering lasciviously over her body like other men always did. "Can you blame me?"

Her breath caught, from that gaze and that grin and the hint of desire evident in his voice, and she wondered as she regarded him closely just what was so disarming about this farmer's son from Kansas, of all places. "You're a strange one."

"Am I?" That gorgeous smile reappeared across his face, and he raised an eyebrow at her.

It'd been years since she'd let her guard down this far. And, more surprising, it felt safer and more comfortable than anything she'd felt before. Of course, that in itself was scary... but in an exciting way. She *wanted* him to flirt. She *wanted* him to look. "Yeah, but I think I've got you figured out," she said, trying to keep her voice playful and even.

"Really?" His eyebrow went a little higher, and his grin was now a teasing challenge.

"Mm hmm." She nodded and gave him a measured look, a smile playing at her lips. He was only in town a few days, though. Maybe that was why it was easier, more comfortable — there was no threat of a relationship gone bad or getting hurt. And there hadn't been any talk of work.

"It didn't take you long." His voice almost seemed to have a slightly husky tone to it now.

Lois crossed her arms and rested them on the table in front of her, leaning towards him with a mischievous smirk on her face, and she pretended not to notice that his eyes had flitted — ever so briefly — to her cleavage and then away again. "Well, it's my business, looking beyond the external."

There was a charged silence between them. His smile was so genuine, his hair falling slightly over his brow, the way his eyes seemed to be looking straight into her soul from behind his glasses... everything about this man was stealing her breath and making her feel delightfully off-balance. But there wasn't a chance of anything beyond tonight, not given his likely potential for leaving and her track record when it came to men.

She cleared her throat and shook herself mentally.

"Don't fall for me, farmboy."

"Too late," he said without missing a beat.

She felt the heat rise to her cheeks and let out a self-conscious chuckle. She breathed in and out to slow her heart rate, and she tried to keep her voice breezy and cheerful as she fought against the urge to just fall with him. "You're leaving town in a few days."

"Maybe not. Maybe I'll get the job tomorrow and stick around."

"Maybe..." she echoed, just taking a moment to search his face, drink in the sight of him once more. He had such a

gorgeous face and a gentle grace about him, and the way he made her feel... all butterflies and warmth. How did he do that? Is that what falling felt like? Was this what he was feeling too?

For long moments, she wasn't even sure what to say. They just stared at each other, the silence comfortable but for the emotionally charged and somewhat heated looks between them. Finally, he broke the invisible connection, ducking his head and his cheeks blushing, which was somehow undeniably sexy.

He cleared his throat and sat up straighter. "So what about you?" he asked. "Ever travel outside of Metropolis?"

She sat back in her seat as well, still trying to gather her wits about her and catch her breath, and she had a sip of water before she began. "Well, back when I was younger, we had a few family trips over the years at different places around the US, and my father even splurged and took us to Paris one year." That'd been... their last good trip. But she didn't dwell on that thought because tonight was for happy thoughts. "Oh! There was the time I spent a semester as an exchange student in Ireland when I was in college. And, while I know we're not talking about work, I did travel to a few different places for work... even went all the way to the Congo before."

"Oh, man, I'm dying to know what kind of job you have that took you to the Congo!" His eyes were wide and she could almost feel his excitement.

"But we're not talking about work," she gave him a sly grin. "I guess you'll just have to try really hard to get that job so you can take me on a second date."

"Second date?" he croaked, his eyebrows shooting up. He recovered quickly. "That implies I get to take you on a first date, too."

"This *is* our first date," she countered.

"A few hours ago, you said it wasn't a date," he said softly, the barest hint of teasing in his voice.

"True, but... that was a couple hours ago. Doesn't it feel more like a date now than it did before?" she asked, somewhat hesitant.

"I guess it kinda feels like one, doesn't it? A really, really good one." He caught her gaze and stared for a moment, and she was surprised at how not uncomfortable the direct eye contact was, now and during their whole conversation.

"Maybe we could call it our almost-first date," she said, her voice a bit thready because he'd stolen her breath again.

"Okay," he agreed softly, and then he reached the short distance across the table and took her hand in his.

She pulled in a sharp breath, the sudden surge of electricity between them making her heart race faster than it had all night so far. She was a little surprised not to see actual sparks, and when she looked back into his eyes, she could tell he was feeling it too.

After a beat, she pulled her hand back away from his, needing to pause the intensity of it all. Her hands went to surround her water glass, the coolness of it helping to temper the sensations running wild throughout her body.

He smiled at her somewhat haltingly, as if he was working to catch his breath and gather his thoughts. Then he worked to pick the conversation back up. "So, you never

really had the urge to travel? Didn't have a wanderlust like me, a need to find something?" he asked, a hint of self-deprecating humor in his voice.

"Well, it wasn't so much lack of the urge as it was... lack of time?" Her face scrunched as she thought about it for a moment. "Actually, it was more the fact that I was on a mission, eager to prove myself and show everyone that I could do what they said I couldn't. My... uh, field of work is definitely a male-dominated one, so I had to work twice as hard."

"So you showed them," he said softly, smiling, more than a hint of pride in his voice... this from a man she'd only just met who somehow made her feel like she was important and valued for how hard she'd worked. He didn't even know what she'd done or how she'd done it. Heck, he didn't even know *what* she did for work. He just... believed her.

"Yeah, I did." She blushed at his praise. "I've got three prestigious awards to my name already," she said, but then winced ever so slightly at how immodest that sounded.

But he didn't seem to think so. "Wow, and you might have that fourth one coming! And, you're only... what... twenty... five? Twenty-six? Actually, never mind, it's not polite to ask a woman her age..."

She giggled, half with relief and half from the bit of self-consciousness that had crept in. "I think in this case, it's a compliment, farmboy. Twenty-six. And... yeah... I guess that is pretty impressive when you stop to think about it."

"It's more than pretty impressive! It's... you're like a force of nature. A tornado."

She scrunched her nose. "Leaving a path of destruction in my wake?" It kind of felt like that sometimes.

"No! No, no. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that." His hand was on hers again, not quite as electric this time, but definitely warm and oh so comforting. "Maybe it's because I'm from Kansas, right in tornado alley, but tornadoes demand respect and attention. They're strong and unyielding. And sometimes..." He dipped his head to catch her eye. "They come in without warning and sweep you off your feet." His large hand squeezed hers and she was speechless.

"That's... I... wow," she said, still unable to find the words.

"You're stunningly brilliant and breathtakingly beautiful." His voice was almost a whisper, rough and low.

A half-laugh, half-gasp escaped her, and it was a long, long moment before she could speak, and she found herself needing to diffuse and deflect a little. She didn't know what to do with so much... of that, so much of him and his mesmerizing and disarming and captivating self.

"And you..." she said finally, "have a way with words. You should be a writer."

His answering chuckle sounded magical, and she dared to imagine a narrative in which she'd get to hear it regularly. Her heart ached at the thought that maybe it wasn't meant to be, but she pushed the thought aside in favor of enjoying what was left of the night.

They talked for at least another hour, maybe more. He'd wanted to know more about her passion, her ambition, so

they'd danced ever closer to the topics they'd agreed not to discuss. She'd alluded to chasing and falling short of her parents' expectations... or rather, their lack of expectations and appreciation for her talents and efforts, how her father had wanted a son and a doctor and her mother hadn't bothered to care. And he'd held her hand again. Told her that she hadn't deserved that, and had somehow known exactly what to say to make her feel better.

In the end, she'd all but told him she was a journalist without saying as much and actually revealing it. But what moved her the most, affected her more than almost anything else had all night... she hadn't scared him off, not in the slightest.

He was impressed, not intimidated.

Inspired, not threatened.

In fact, she was sure all of it had only made him more interested. And the feeling was undeniably mutual. Everything he'd said and done, the way he touched her with his words and somehow made holding hands feel so magical and inviting... she wanted more of it, all of it... and she wanted it for far longer than one night.

It was much later when Lois realized how much more the bar had emptied out when their combined laughter sounded off the walls and ceiling far louder than she expected, and it startled them, leaving them slightly embarrassed, until they dissolved again into much quieter giggling.

"Ohh, I haven't laughed so hard since..." She racked her brain as she clutched her arm around her aching stomach. "Ever. I don't think I've ever laughed this hard. Or smiled this much," she said, a bit breathless still.

He was still recovering from their laughing fit too, but he was staring at her again with those intense, smoldering eyes. It felt like an eternity, the most amazing eternity in which her breath kept catching and her heart was skittering all throughout her chest, before he tried to speak. He opened his mouth slightly but seemed to second guess himself.

"You can say it," she told him softly. He'd been catching himself half the night, trying to be polite, find a balance, not overstep. But they'd both stepped far past whatever boundary had been there at the beginning of the evening, and she wondered now what was causing his hesitation. She *wanted* him to say things now. She wanted to hear it all.

"I think I've found what I was looking for," he said, a husky edge to his voice, his eyes not leaving hers.

Her breath caught for the hundredth time that night, the sudden swoop in her stomach at his words making her whole body tingle. Her voice was barely a whisper. "But what if you don't get the job tomorrow?"

"What if I do?"

"It's not that simple."

"What's not?"

*Dating me*, she thought. Tonight was magical. Wonderful. Tonight felt like forever. And that was terrifying. Terrifying that she might not get it, that it might not be real. And even more terrifying if it was.

"What if... what if you get the job, and we go on our seco — first date, and what if it's not the same as tonight?

What if the... magic isn't there?"

"It doesn't feel that way to me... can't you feel it?"

"But what if the only reason it worked tonight is because of what we left out or because you might not be here next week? What if it's too good to be true?"

"What if it's not? Can you... do you think..." He ran a hand roughly through his hair, clearly trying to find the right words, and he took a deep breath before he continued. "What if it was fate?"

"Fate?" Her voice cracked a bit. Did she even believe that strongly in fate? If someone had asked her yesterday, she'd have told them to take a flying leap. But everything about tonight... everything about *him*... maybe it *had* to be fate.

"Yeah... fate." His voice was low and thready. "I mean... what are the odds of tonight having happened?" He let his words hang in the air while he searched for his next. "I've never... connected with anyone like I have with you. It almost seems unreal — I want to keep pinching myself to see if I'm dreaming."

"Me too," she breathed.

The silence stretched between them again, a mix of hope and anxiousness and uncertainty. He looked deep in thought, not looking at her directly. Then, finally, he met her gaze again with that intense look that promised so much more than tonight if only she'd let herself take a leap of faith.

"We could..." he started tentatively, "leave it up to fate... sort of. I mean, more like trust? I can sense you're the type to guard your trust carefully, and you've only just met me. So what if... you meet me here tomorrow after work. Six o'clock? I'll tell you about my interview. No names tonight, no numbers. I'll have to trust that you'll be here. You'll have to trust that I'll be here. We'll see how it goes?"

"I... can't... I mean, I have to know, have to prepare for all the possible outcomes because maybe you won't get the job, and then what'll I do?" There was a lump building in her throat, and the thought of her highest hopes being dashed clenched at her heart, making her chest tight and tears threaten at the back of her eyes.

"Hey," he said softly, taking her hand in both of his. "We can figure it out. There are lots of jobs in Metropolis."

She shook her head, even as she took comfort in his grasp. "I don't want you to settle. This is your career. That matters too, just as much as mine."

"I know. And I won't. There are still more options for me... I didn't spend my years since college working my way to the top of my field like you did. If I don't get my dream job... well, there's no saying I won't get there eventually."

"Are you sure? It still sounds an awful lot like settling to me." It was too much to hope for, wasn't it? She didn't want him to settle. Not because of her.

He shook his head, quietly and confidently. "I wouldn't settle after searching this long."

She inhaled sharply. His words... his words were about the job. But everything in from his eyes to posture to the way his thumb was smoothing over the back of her hand...

He meant her.



Her heart tensed, fearful at the thought of feelings so powerful and at the thought of leaving fate in the hands of something so tenuous as trust. What if he didn't show? She had every reason to believe that he would... but she'd never trusted someone so quickly and so implicitly before. Why hadn't they introduced themselves? If she had his name, she could look him up, find him again.

"What's your name?" she blurted out impulsively, regretting the words as soon as they left her mouth, as if she were slamming the door in his face, denying everything he'd said and his attempt at an enchanting conclusion to the evening and the hope for fate to give them more.

She was about to apologize, take it back and —

"Farmboy." His voice was quiet and gentle, and his smile was soft, stretching across his face and making his warm, chocolate eyes crinkle ever so slightly.

She could so easily fall in love with that face. And she couldn't say no to it. "Okay." Her heart hung suspended in her chest, her eyes hopeful and searching his. "Okay," she said again, a bit louder this time, though she wasn't sure why.

His smile spread into a grin, the kind that lit up his whole face and the room around them too.

"How do we..." she started, unsure of their next move. "Do we just... say goodbye, then? What do we do?"

She was filled with inexplicable optimism and excitement; it didn't make any sense. She wanted him to have all the answers, and she wanted it to be tomorrow night already. Because all of sudden, she was flooded with hope. And she wanted desperately to cling to the gift he'd given her of this perfect night and a dream of the future.

This wasn't her. Trusting like this. It wasn't her at all. But maybe it could be.

And so they said goodnight. A hug that felt comforting and electrifying all at once. His lips on her cheek for a chaste goodbye that she could still feel the echo of tingling on her skin. His cautious whispers of hope in her ear. And then they walked out the door of the bar and parted ways.

She didn't even know if his hotel was the direction he was walking in, which seemed terribly poetic that it not be in the direction of her apartment a few blocks away. Or maybe it was unpoetic. Because if fate were involved, then by all rights, he should be walking with her right now, to her door, right? And she'd be inviting him up for coffee and seeing what happened...

But no, she didn't want that with him. Not like that. She wanted so much more. She wanted to see him again. And hear his voice and his laugh. And she wanted to hug him. And kiss him. And never let him go. Why hadn't she kissed him?

Oh God, what if she'd made the worst mistake of her life? She should have gotten his name, his number, anything! What if something happened and he couldn't make it? She'd seen *Love Affair* — what if he got hit by a car and couldn't meet her? How would she know? How would she ever find him?

She stopped walking, the pain in her chest too much to bear. She wanted to turn around and run after him, but she was scared to think she might turn and find him already gone.

She held her breath, her heart in her throat, and she turned slowly...

And he was there!

Standing in front of the bar as if he hadn't walked even a foot away, though she knew he had. Looking after her with hopeful eyes, his hands shoved in the pockets of his slacks.

"Farmboy," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

And then they were both moving toward each other, her hands on his shoulders and his soft, warm hands cupping her face the second they were close enough. His lips captured hers in a searing, searching kiss, and she melted against him as she kissed him back. Explosions like fireworks scattered throughout her body, the embers sparkling as they fell. Then he was slowing, gentling his kisses until he managed to pull away. They stood, breathless, his hands sliding down to circle her waist, settling on the small of her back and her forehead resting against his.

When she'd caught most of her breath, she pulled back and said in a whisper, "I don't know if I can leave you like this." All the possible scenarios played out in her head. "What if you get hit by a car and break a leg and can't make it to meet me? Or I get kidnapped and can't make it? Anything could happen..." She laughed lightly, trying to temper her uncertainty and not sound as crazy as she felt.

His airy chuckle filled the space between them. "I promise I'll be careful crossing the street. And... do you make a habit of being kidnapped, generally? That's not an entirely likely thing to happen."

"You'd be surprised." She managed to smirk at him and laugh despite the anxiety still simmering under the surface. "But, seriously, what if...?"

"I'll send a note, call the bar, show up every night at 6pm until I see you." He placed a kiss on her forehead and then stepped back, as if needing to distance himself lest they start kissing again and never stop.

"No names?" she asked, hating the whimper that accompanied her voice.

He shook his head. "No names."

"You promise you'll be here? Six o'clock?"

"A thousand tornados couldn't keep me away."

Her laugh held a slight sob, but the tears that were starting were hopeful and she trusted him. "See you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," he said as he nodded.

She watched his breath hitch as he turned to walk away. And then, finally, she turned as well and headed home, knowing that tomorrow would be the first time in forever she wouldn't be able to concentrate on work.

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The next morning, Lois rode the elevator up to the newsroom, trying her best to push aside thoughts of last night and the anticipation of tonight; she needed to if she had any hope of getting work done today. When she stepped off the elevators and onto the newsroom floor, she was greeted with a roar of applause and the sight of a newspaper banner strung across the center of the bullpen, each page of her multi-page spread making up the individual flags. Different colored balloons dotted the area surrounding her

desk.

She smiled widely as she walked down the ramp to where everyone was gathered around. It felt really good to be celebrated, recognized for her hard work. She might not be particularly friendly with anyone but Perry and Jimmy, but people respected her and were impressed by her work, especially when it came to taking down a crime ring like this almost single-handedly. No one denied that she was the best, and they applauded her for it with gusto. No one wanted to hang out with Mad Dog Lane, but they sure as heck respected her.

Perry barked something about a ladies' luncheon at Buckingham Palace, making everyone scatter back to work, and the moment was over. But it was enough, more than enough. She knew she was appreciated — she still couldn't get that raise out of Perry, but she knew he would if he could.

She sat down at her desk, settling in to check her voicemails and other messages. Suddenly, there was a commotion in the newsroom. A man, wild-eyed and looking like he might have been living on the streets, was yelling her name and warning of an explosion... a package in his hands. The security guards were busy trying to drag him away, but she was listening to his words. Sabotage. Explosion. Space program. He was scared, that much was clear, and he managed to shove the package at her before security took him away.

Everyone was up and talking, speculating what this could have been about and if there had really been a bomb. Lois was back at her desk, investigating already. The haphazardly wrapped package had been full of scraps of every type of paper imaginable, scientific writing scrawled on all sides seeming to do with the space program's shuttle. She could barely understand anything else; she was going to need help on this from STAR Labs. And it seemed that time was of the essence, given that the space program was already facing delays, the launch window edging ever closer.

Lois hoped she could convince Perry to follow the ravings of an apparent mad scientist. There was something to this. She could feel it. She needed to ask him now.

She stormed into Perry's office without warning, and started talking. "Chief, I think there's a story here, and we should have this guy checked out. You know the crazy one from this morning? He was an engineer at F. Bradford —"

"Lois, can't you see I'm in the middle of something here?" He gestured at the other side of his desk, but she didn't take her eyes off Perry.

"Oh." She paused, still waiting for his answer. He could just send her off with a quick yes and then she'd be out of his hair.

"Lois Lane, Clark Kent," Perry made the introduction of some guy, the one who'd been sitting there, and she really didn't have time for —

She looked up and her heart stuck in her throat. She couldn't breathe, couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"My little tornado," came his barely audible whisper as he stood from the chair.

What was... how was this... ? This was... impossible. Right? But... Perry was in the middle of... and her farmboy

was supposed to...

"This is your interview?" she asked, her voice cracking as she struggled to keep her breathing under control.

He was standing. Just three feet away, his mouth hanging open as if all his words had fallen out before he'd had a chance to speak them. But he managed a nod.

"This is your dream job?" The thoughts and emotions were stirring, churning like a storm raging inside her.

Again he nodded, looking just as breathless as she felt. He reached out his hand, but not all the way, as if he wasn't sure he should offer to shake hers.

"You *are* a writer." Her voice was full of wonder and confusion and she wasn't even sure what to make of this. It was all too much. But... there he was.

Her fate, her farmboy, and maybe her future was just standing there... like he'd been hand delivered. And suddenly, he seemed to find himself again, and he offered up his hand to shake, confidently and with that 1000-watt smile.

"It's nice to meet you, Lois Lane." His voice was rich and velvety, just like last night. "I'm Clark Kent."

Wordlessly, she reached out to shake his hand, and the jolt was the same as last night, sending tingling bolts of something magical throughout her body. "It's nice to meet you too," she said, softly, almost automatically. She squeezed his hand a little before letting it go, only somewhat aware that Perry was flummoxed and had been trying to get their attention for some time.

Before Perry could rant or comment, she started toward the door. She gave the handsome stranger — Clark Kent — her farmboy a soft smile, pausing just before she passed him and put her hand on the small of his back, pressing gently as she raised to her toes, and whispered, "I hope your interview goes well."

THE END