

Clark and Lois — The Lost Years Matchmaker Chronicle Volume 3

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: As Alt Clark and Herb are leaving canon Lois and Clark at the end of “Lois and Clarks,” Herb offers his services in the search for Alt Lois. Herb moves Alt Clark into the past so that he can unite with Lois as she proceeds with the investigation, but things don’t work out exactly as Herb planned.

Disclaimers: The characters in this story are property of DC, December 3rd productions, and Warner Bros. No Copyright infringement is intended. I have just borrowed the characters for a short time.

Authors note:

This is the third part of a multi-part saga. If you haven’t done so as yet, please read the previous Volumes. You will have a better understanding of the fundamental premises of the set if you do. I wish to express my thanks to my Beta readers Ray Reynolds and Artemis for their invaluable help. I would especially like to thank Datasprite12 for her efforts in ‘punching up’ my French dialogue. My French is **very** rusty. I was close, but close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. This was a VERY rough draft when it first landed in their hands. Their patience with a rookie author has been exemplary.

One **absolutely** critical point: In this entire series I will be dealing with time travel and multi-universe travel. It’s therefore critical that you have the concept of alternate universes and are aware of which one the story is currently in at all times. I try to make sure you know where you are by using the “Universal Locator Designation” (See author’s notes. A more complete explanation will be made in the Volume to be titled TTEMPO which will include the science behind it.). Some of the differences in ULDs will be very slight, changing only at the Tau value. If you don’t keep this in mind, you will easily become confused as to what is happening and think I’m simply changing the story already presented in an earlier volume when it’s actually another universe. As far as times, I will attempt to ensure that time markers are always present.

This particular story takes place after “Lois and Clarks” and also before the series started. In some cases I will, of necessity, be going ‘between’ the episodes. In this Volume I’m using a number of flashbacks. In most cases the flashbacks are actual transcriptions of the dialog from the show.

< denotes thoughts >

[*playback of a recording or TV Commentary*]

/ telepathic communications /

(#) footnotes

Also, please read the end notes.

As always comments are welcome. (ken.janney@kjanney.com)

OK, so you’ve already read a book, and you haven’t even started the story yet. Thanks for your patience. Now, without further ado I present for your enjoyment:

Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 023 x Gamma 004 x Tau -120 — Canon Lois and Clark universe also called — Prime

Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036 — Canon Alt Clark universe also called — Alt 1

Clark and Lois — The Lost Years — The Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 3

Chapter 1 — Herb Makes an Offer

March 1997

Herb left 348 Hyperion Avenue with the alternate Clark and proceeded to his time sled. It was parked at a short distance away, so he had a chance to talk to Clark while they walked.

“My boy, what exactly have you done to try to find your Lois?”

Still feeling bereft at losing Lois again, Clark was rather preoccupied with his own thoughts. He hadn’t thought about that when Herb had approached him the other day asking if he could help out in the other universe. Herb had told him that Clark had been trapped in time, and he wasn’t sure that he would be able to rescue him. All he actually thought about was the fact that he would be seeing Lois again, and if Clark couldn’t be rescued ... maybe, just maybe he could stay, so he had jumped at the chance. Now everything was returned to normal. Lois had her Clark and vice versa, and he was going home alone.

Herb, noting that Clark was rather preoccupied, repeated his question. “My boy, what exactly have you done to try to find your Lois?”

Herb’s question finally registered on his consciousness. Clark wondered at this question. He replied with a somewhat despondent tone, “Shortly after Lois left with you that time she was with me in my universe, I went to the Congo, and I personally searched the area. I had checked her itinerary, so I knew when she had arrived. It had been over three years earlier. I went to Brazzaville and followed, as best as I could, her movements from the airport where she landed. She had been following up on illegal gun shipments into the Congo being supplied to the rebel forces. She must have immediately gone undercover because I lost her when she left the airport. She must have gone into the jungle country following up on some leads, but I was never able to pick up her trail.”

With a satisfied expression on his face Herb decided that he was on the right track and decided to push the issue to confirm his suspicions. “What inquiries did you make to try to follow up on her trail?”

Clark was starting to get irritated with all of these questions and asked in a sharp tone, “What are you getting at, Herb? I did everything I could think of to find her. Do you think I wouldn’t have done everything possible? Can’t you see that I wouldn’t just give up?”

With a somewhat dejected air he continued, “I went from village to village asking if anyone had seen a white woman. I had gone to the Daily Planet personnel office and found her old jacket. There was a passport size photo which I borrowed to show around. No one had any information. Eventually, I gave up. Shouldn’t I have?”

In his frustration Clark threw out his arms as if to encompass all that he had done and asked, “Did I give up too easily? She’d been missing for three years by the time I got there. The trail was

cold. Could anyone have done better? Your questions seem to indicate that there was more I could have done.”

Maintaining his calm and trying to calm Clark, Herb said, “Patience, my boy, patience. All will be made clear shortly. Just bear with me for a few more questions. Did you inquire about a lone individual or one in company with others?”

“Why would I ask that? Everyone knew that she always worked alone, so I always asked for a lone woman. Is that important?”

“Let’s make this hop, and then we can continue, okay?” They had reached the time sled, and both climbed aboard. This was Wells’ original machine which had geographical as well as temporal movement capability. While Herb was setting the controls for the chosen destination, the conversation was placed on hold.

Herb set the controls to take them to a particular alley in Metropolis from which he knew that he could move to Clark’s alternate reality. This seemed to be the ***only*** spot from which he could move to the other Earth. He had been puzzling over this fact for some time and hadn’t come to a resolution to that problem as yet. He wondered if it had anything to do with the fact that this was the alley that Tempus used when his malfunctioning time sled crossed the universe barrier? He needed to make a note of the longitude and latitude, so that he could find it in the future. Herb realized that it was going to require much more thought.

Herb used this point to point transfer site to move to the alternate universe.

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036

Local designation — Alt 1

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While they had been in transit, Herb had been mulling over the information he had gotten from Clark. After they arrived, Herb came to a decision. He said to Clark, “My boy, as we were leaving Lois and Clark you said that finding your Lois was ‘impossible’. Well, I never say . . . impossible. Would you like me to assist in your quest to find your Lois?”

Clark was somewhat startled by this question. He had accompanied Herb to the other universe and intellectually had been aware that Herb could move through time, but it had somehow never occurred to him to ask him to assist in finding his Lois. “Are you serious? How can you help? Could you?” Suddenly it dawned on him just what might be accomplished by going back in time. “Would you do that for me?”

Herb said, “Tut, tut, my boy, of course I can and will do that. One of my goals in this life is to help move your universe in the direction of Utopia. Since the union of Clark Kent, or Superman, with his soul mate, Lois Lane is critical to that, I am more than happy to assist.”

Clark seeing hope spring anew said with growing enthusiasm, “I would appreciate any help you could give me, that’s for sure. This is more than I ever could have hoped for. I never even thought to ask for your help.”

Herb thought back to when he was trying to help Lois and Clark defeat the curse. They had changed history back in the middle ages with disastrous consequences which they had to rectify. He replied, “In the past I have intervened, and it has changed the course of history, sometimes, but not always, with tragic effect, and I intend to avoid doing that again. That being the case I will not simply take you back, so that you can rescue her and bring her back immediately. For one thing you have not at that time as yet revealed yourself. For another we do not know what actions taken by Lois have had an impact on the current day.”

As they were getting out of the time sled Herb broached his idea “I realize that you have looked for her yourself, but I can

take you back to the point when she arrived. You were looking for her three years after she had disappeared and that was after the Congolese wars. There were probably less than a thousand Americans in the country, and most of them would have been in Brazzaville. That would have improved your odds of locating her. What I propose is this. Since you know her time and location of arrival in the Congo, I can take you to that time and place.”

Herb continued to explain his thoughts on the matter as they walked to Clark’s apartment. “You asked if my question about your seeking a lone woman or one in company was important. You replied that you were always looking for a woman alone and lost the trail. That substantiates, to me at least, that perhaps she wasn’t alone and ***that*** is ***why*** you lost her. She was ***accompanied*** by someone — ***you***.”

Clark got a hopeful expression on his face as he thought about this. “You know, you could be right! I never thought to ask for any ***party*** with a woman in it. Could I have really been with her??? Will I be with her??? With Lois, ***my*** Lois?”

After they had entered Clark’s apartment, Herb continued, “Perhaps you could meet her and then manage to accompany her on her investigation. You will need to keep in mind that for part of this time you would currently be in Metropolis as Clark Kent, working at the Daily Planet and you have not been revealed to the world as Superman. You would need to assume an alias and keep your powers concealed. During this period your revelation will occur so in order to avoid a conflict with that you must ensure that Lois is unaware of your powers unless and until you’re sure of your relationship, and she is prepared to be told all of the truth.”

“I’ll do whatever I need to do to be with her. Don’t you know that by now, Herb?”

“By taking you back to join her in her investigation, we ***may*** be altering things ***slightly***.” Herb said, “However, I’m of the opinion that what we see as the current state of things ***includes*** any activities you may have taken part in while in the past. Your activities will simply be a part of what we now know as the past.”

Clark was shocked at this possibility. With wonder in his voice he said, “Wow, I wonder what we did. Well, I guess I’ll just have to wait and see. One thing I do know, that story was never filed. What could have prevented us from filing that story?”

Herb thought for a few seconds before continuing. “Ideally, we should go back to sometime ***before*** her arrival so that you can establish yourself. When she arrives you should be ready to meet her, either as a colleague or casually. That will be up to you.”

Thinking over the alternatives for a few seconds before continuing, Herb finally said, “I’ll leave you at that point. I’ll return at one year intervals. I’ll make the date easy to remember, let’s meet on your birthday, February 28th, each year and meet at Livingston Falls. I’ll be there from noon until 3 PM local. Keep in mind that this is going to be a long trip, possibly as much as five years, however, you will be able to return immediately after we depart openly and hopefully have Lois with you. To all intents and purposes, you will have only been gone a couple of minutes as far as any observer could determine. The time we just spent helping Lois and Clark in the other universe did not translate to an equal amount of time here in your universe. If you check you will find that we returned about five minutes after we left even though we were in their universe for several days. During this period you will need to avoid any overt paradoxes. You know where and when you performed your search, and you should make a concerted effort to avoid meeting yourself at those times.”

Clark gave the offered plan some consideration and saw the wisdom displayed in it. And with a nod Clark accepted the offered advice. He had this nagging feeling nibbling around the edges of his mind. It finally crystallized into a thought which he

was able to express. “Wait a minute. If I come back to my own time and Lois is with me just minutes after I left, how do I explain it? She was missing and presumed dead, and suddenly she is back home with me at the same age as when she left? Surely you don’t want time travel to be public knowledge? A super-powered man openly flaunting his abilities is one thing but a time-traveling one is another.”

Reaching up Herb removed his bowler hat and moving his hands around the rim spun it in his hands. Obviously this was a nervous habit that Herb had developed over the years and was done without thought. After mulling over Clark’s statement for a time he admitted, “By Jove, that was a good thought there. Time-travel confuses even me sometimes.”

Never being one to pace Herb walked over to Clark’s easy chair and sat down. With a frown creasing his brow he thought for a while and then jumping back up faced Clark again. “How’s this? We’ll bring you both back to the present perhaps a week later. You can say you found her in present day Republic of the Congo. By then she’ll know about your special abilities, and you two can make up a story about what she was doing during those five years?”

This idea seemed to resolve the problem, but Clark worried that he had found a fatal flaw in Herb’s plan even before he could execute it, and he stood there looking apprehensive. After he had had a chance to mull over Herb’s suggestion for some time, he sighed in relief, and a huge smile broke out on his face. “Good enough for me, I’m sure we can come up with something believable. Maybe she had amnesia or she was confined in a hospital due to illness,” he exclaimed.

Now wishing to convey his good wishes on this endeavor Herb continued with a very upbeat tone in his voice, “I envy you, my boy, on the adventure you are undertaking. Just think, for the next five years you will have the opportunity to get to know the Lois Lane of this world. You will have the opportunity to be her friend, confidant, and protector. Who knows but that by the end of that time, you may even be married and return as husband and wife? Stranger things have happened.”

Clark was becoming more and more enthusiastic as Herb continued to talk. “This is really going to work! I’ll be able to be with her. I wonder how she will react to me. I know that with the other Lois I felt a connection. It’s hard to describe, you know, but when we touched, I didn’t want to let go.”

As Clark thought about this a bemused expression came over his features, <It was like the connection formed a bond uniting our two bodies into one. Not like in sex but still a physical joining. Lois said that she felt it too but that what she had with her Clark was stronger. I don’t know how that could be. I was so ***drawn*** to her I didn’t want her to go back to him. I wanted her to stay with me. This last time with her was torture, but seeing her with her Clark, how they reacted to each other, I can see that they were meant to be together. I can only hope that I’ll find the same thing with ***my*** Lois.>

Herb, noting the expression on Clark’s face wondered exactly what he was thinking but decided not to pry. He cleared his throat to get Clark’s attention and then said, “Clark, I need a new supply of gold for the time sled. While you’re mining that for me, you should probably mine some for yourself. You will not have a source of income in 1992. You may wish to consider finding some precious gems as well. Pound for pound they are more valuable than gold, and you can easily convert gems into currency”

Clark flew off and returned in about an hour with several bags full of gold nuggets and a smaller bag full of uncut gem stones. Herb said that a part of one bag would be adequate for his needs and that he should carry the remainder with him to deposit in a bank when they arrived in the proper time. Clark then started packing for the trip. He was thinking exclusively of tropical

clothing and so packed suitable suits and casual clothes. He added a driver’s license and passport in the name of Charles King which he had commonly used when going undercover. He also had Daily Planet ID in that name, so he could be a colleague if he chose to be. Once these preparations were completed, they were ready to go.

Herb didn’t need to be a keen observer to see the level of excitement being manifested by Clark, and he felt the need to caution him. “Clark, your dream is about to come true, your dream of being united with your Lois. I’m glad that I can do this for you. I just hope that it turns out all right. But I must caution you that we are in uncharted territory here. I have made some assumptions, but I cannot be sure how this will affect history. My assumptions may or may not be the case. Only time will tell. That has always seemed an odd aphorism to me but how true it is. Only ***time will*** tell how this will turn out and how it will affect history.” Herb set the time and space coordinates to a little more than two months prior to Lois’ arrival at Brazzaville and for the outskirts of that city, and they set off.

One of the things about the time sled that Herb liked was the fact that you could see where you were and what was happening outside of the time bubble created by the flux facilitator. They were able to observe as the Atlantic Ocean was crossed and laughed at the aircraft and ships that they saw moving in reverse as they traveled backwards in time. When they reached the vicinity of Brazzaville, Herb made a side trip. By keeping the flux facilitator active and manipulating the geo controls, he was able to move them to Livingston Falls so that they could select a meeting spot for the future. “Remember, I will be here sometime between noon and 3 PM local time on February 28 each year.” They then returned to Brazzaville and ‘parked’ on the outskirts.

Chapter 2 — The Daily Planet — Brazzaville

Monday December 30, 1991

As they stepped out of the time sled Herb said to Clark, “Today is December 30, 1991. I believe you told me that Lois is due in on March 11, 1992. We used the time sled to come to Brazzaville so that you could not possibly be observed flying here yourself. I would recommend that you go to a local bank and have the gold you currently possess converted into the local currency. I would hold back at least some of the gems as a reserve. You may have need of them later.”

At times Herb reverted to old habits from his years at Henley House School and assumed a lecturing tone, “Always keep in mind that there currently are two of you in this time period and that you have not been exposed as Superman as yet. You must be very diligent in avoiding revealing your powers.”

Herb extended his hand to Clark and as they shook hands Herb, in a very sincere tone said, “My boy, I envy you this opportunity. You have the chance to not only be united with your soul mate but to possibly rescue her from whatever terrible end she could have suffered.”

Clark nearly moved to tears by gratitude, and the thought that in a relatively short time he would be with ***his*** Lois Lane took Herb’s hand in his and shaking it replied, “I really don’t know how to thank you Herb for all that you’re doing for me.”

Herb was very moved at Clark’s obvious emotion and replied in a somewhat somber tone, “My boy, all the thanks I need is for you to succeed in this mission, to see you happily united with your Lois, and to see this universe move to Utopia as so many of the others have. If that happens, that will be thanks enough. Good luck to you, my boy.” With that Herb took his leave, and the time sled disappeared from view.

Clark had studied the history of the Congo when he had first looked for Lois. One of the key items he had noticed was the French influence. It had been a French colony some years before,

and that influence remained to this day. French was still the primary language in the major cities. English was the second in usage. Dialects of the Bantu language dominated in the northern regions among the nationals.

The first thing that Clark did was to go to a jeweler and have some of the gems graded and valued. He didn't realize it as he did so, but he had stumbled on the shop where he had been greeted as Charlie while he was looking for Lois. When this realization hit him, it did so like a ton of bricks. Here was confirmation that he was on the right track.

The owner of the shop, m. Jean-Luc Artois, a jeweler of some forty years experience worked with him. "I have a selection of various gemstones I would like to have valued. Could you help me?" Clark poured out the gems which he had selected onto a black velvet covered pad on the counter.

M. Artois, by observing his clothing, had known that this customer was an American even before he said anything, so he asked in his accented English, "Might I to ask where you came by zeeze gemstones?"

In as sincere a tone as he could manage Clark explained, "I have been interested in mineralogy and gemology from my childhood. I have taken trips to numerous mine fields over the years. Thus I have accumulated them over a period of time. You may check the stolen gem international registry. I am sure that you will find no entries for any of these gems as being stolen. I mined them myself in various locations."

"I am sure zat you will par-do me, but I am reequir-ed by zee law to check zee registry." The jeweler first separated them by size and type and then pulled out a sheaf of papers and leafed through it. Once he was satisfied that none of the gems had been reported as stolen he heaved a sigh of relief. "What may I do pour you? What do you weesh to do wiss zeeze gems?"

"M. Artois, I wish to sell the group I have presented. Could you value them? I'm aware that there will be waste in cutting, but I believe you will find that all are of high quality."

The jeweler weighed, measured, and analyzed all of the stones. When he had finished, he presented Clark with his valuation. Clark said, "If you would be in the market to purchase this group, I will accept your offer minus ten percent as a commission. Would that be acceptable?"

"I would be will-ing to pay zee full val-ue."

"No, I insist that you take a commission on the purchase."

The jeweler held out his hand and said, "Sank you. I can geeve you zee cashier's check."

Clark asked, "Do you deal with an international bank?"

"Mais oui, Yes, I do. Why?"

"I need to establish an account and would ask what bank you would recommend."

"My bank eet ees just down zee strit. We could go zare, and I could zimply transfer zee funds to any account zat you establesh."

"That would be very kind of you."

M. Artois shouted through a door behind the counter, "Henri, venez à l'avant vous occuper du comptoir. Je serai de retour sous peu."

(tr: "Henri, come out front and tend the counter. I will be back shortly.")

They went down the street, Clark opened an account under the name of Charles King, and the jeweler transferred the funds for his purchase. Clark thanked him, and he returned to his shop.

Next Clark went to a local assayer who analyzed the gold for quality and quantity and offered Clark a sum which he found to be very reasonable. He completed that deal and then went to deposit these funds into his account.

After purchasing a used Land Rover at a local car dealership, Clark loaded his luggage in it and looked for a hotel. A hotel named the Bonne Nuit de Sommeil attracted his attention because

of the name "The Good Night's Rest", so he took a suite on the 5th floor, number 501. He paid in advance for the suite for a three-month stay. After he moved his luggage up to his suite and made himself at home, he bought a copy of the local French edition of the Daily Planet and read through it to get a flavor for how things were being handled here.

Some of the headlines and stories were:

"Le maire D'arnet congédie le directeur général et porte des accusations de détournement de fonds."

"Le maire Jacques D'Arnet, récemment élu, donne suite à sa déclaration promettant de réduire la corruption présente au sein de l'administration municipale. Avec une initiative audacieuse, il a congédié son directeur municipal et l'a remplacé par son adjoint. Les rumeurs indiquent que le directeur général aurait siphonné plusieurs millions de Francs Congolais des caisses de la ville sous l'administration précédente. Il fait maintenant face à des accusations ... "

(tr: "Mayor D'Arnet dismisses city manager and files charges of misappropriation of city funds.")

"The recently elected mayor m. Jacques D'Arnet is following through on his promises of dealing with corruption within the city administration. In a bold move he has fired the city manager and replaced him with his assistant. It is said that the city manager had siphoned off millions of Congo Francs from the city treasury under the previous administration. He now faces charges ... ")

"Le maire nomme un nouveau chef de la police, invoquant la corruption au sein de du corps policier."

Poursuivant l'implémentation de ses promesse électorales, le maire D'Arnet a licencié le chef de police Robert Roteliet et promu le chef adjoint Phillippe Jordan pour combler le poste temporairement. Depuis le remaniement du personnel administratif de la police, le nombre d'arrestations a augmenté de vingt cinq pour cent ... "

(tr: "Mayor appoints new Chief of Police, cites corruption within force.")

"Following through on more of his promises, the reformer, Mayor D'Arnet, had removed Chief of Police Robert Roteliet and promoted Assistant Chief Phillippe Jordan to fill the position temporarily. Since the change of police administration arrests have gone up by twenty five percent ... ")

"Le maire redémarre les projets de travaux urbains."

"Certains projets qui avaient été arrêtés en raison de manque de fonds ont reprit en raison de l'afflux de liquidités récupérées des comptes bancaires des fonctionnaires corrompus ... "

(tr: "Mayor restarts city works projects.")

"A number of projects which had been stopped because of lack of funding have been restarted due to an influx of cash being recovered from the bank accounts of corrupt officials ... ")

Clark knew that his French was good enough to pass as a native so he read with total comprehension. After reading these articles he felt that the reporting was adequate although he thought he could do better. He also thought that his phraseology might be just a little bit better than what he was reading. If the local office drafted him into reporting on any stories, he knew that he could handle it. It might be a way to fill in some time if he had any time to spare. He had no idea at this point just how much of his time would be occupied with the investigation.

After the New Year's celebrations he sought out the local branch of the Daily Planet which Clark found in a high rise office building. The main office was listed as number 1000 indicating that they had the entire floor. When he got off the elevator, he saw a door marked main office and walked over and opening the door let himself in.

As he opened the door, he saw that just to his left there was a pair of desks at right angles to each other with a pair of young

women sitting at them.

As soon as he opened the door, the one with her back to the wall with the door saw the door opening out of the corner of her eye and turned to see who was entering. When she got a good look, she muttered, “Ooo la la.”

At this comment the other girl, who had been working on a paste up of the society page for the Sunday edition, looked up to see the cause of her sister’s excitement. She turned around and catching sight of Clark echoed her sister’s exclamation, “Ooo ... la ... la!” with feeling.

Derek Price, the office manager, saw him enter and moved over to greet the visitor. “My name is Derek Price. How may I help you?”

“Mr. Price, My name is Charlie King. I work for the Daily Planet in Metropolis.” Charlie flashed his ID. “I’m over here on assignment. I’ll be here for a while, so I thought I’d stop in and introduce myself.”

Derek said, “That’s odd, I wasn’t notified that you were coming.”

“That’s not too surprising; this is a very sensitive investigation. It is really on a ‘need to know’ basis. It was my option as to whether to come in to the office or not. I chose to because, frankly, I need access to some support services that will only be available here.”

Derek replied, “Okay, I can see that. Well, welcome to the Congo. How long will you be here?”

“That is yet to be determined, Mr. Price.”

Before he got any farther, Derek interrupted, “Please call me Derek.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that. By the same token I’m Charlie.”

“OK, Charlie, please, let me take you around and introduce you to my staff. We don’t own the building the way the main office does in Metropolis. We lease these offices and because of that the staff are scattered around in several offices.”

Charlie asked, “How does that work for you? In Metropolis we have a main ‘bullpen’ where most of the reporters have their desks and can interact freely. With your staff separated into different offices, how do they collaborate?”

Derek replied, “We have the entire floor, but our lease does not allow us to do the kind of remodeling that would be required to accommodate that floor plan. We’d have to knock out walls and such to accommodate that, and it just isn’t allowed. To be perfectly honest we have less going on than you do in Metropolis. I have a smaller staff. A lot of what we print comes from the wire services anyhow. In this office we have Suzanne and Colette Black. They have an advice column, and they also take care of the Society pages.” Suzanne and Colette were identical twins in their early twenties, raven haired beauties with knock out figures. It was obvious that Derek had an appreciative eye for the women.

Suzanne and Colette had both forgotten whatever they had been doing as soon as Clark had entered the office and were both watching with interest as this gorgeous hunk talked with Derek.

(Authors note: French being the native language of most of the staff, they are actually thinking in French. For the sake of the reader, their thoughts will be translated and simply written in English. However, when spoken the French will be displayed, and the translation will appear separately.)

As Derek called her over to introduce her, Suzanne stood up and brought her hands up and starting beside her breasts she slowly, sensuously, ran her hands down her sides, emphasizing her curves, smoothing her dress down. It was a tight fitting little black number with a skirt that came to just about mid-thigh. With a very sexy sway to her hips, she approached Charlie and presented her hand to him while saying warmly, “ello. Please to call moi Suzanne.”

Charlie wondered how he should respond to these women. He thought <‘When in Rome or Congo ... > Charlie took her

hand and bending at the waist slightly, kissed the back of it, and replied with all the charm he could muster, “*Hello*, Suzanne.”

Next it was Colette’s turn. Not to be outdone by her sister when she stood up, she gave a little shimmy which wiggled her loose skirt back into place. She had on a form fitting knit top with a scoop neckline and a loose skirt that was even shorter than her sister’s. Her shimmy did more than shake her skirt back into place, it also set her breasts quivering with earthquake like aftershocks. She walked over and presented her hand while saying with open admiration, “ello, I am please to met you. Please to call moi Colette.”

Charlie took the proffered hand and bending over slightly, kissed the back of it while replying again with charm, “I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Colette.”

The girls each gave him a very appraising look as they each headed back to their desks.

Charlie could hear their private comments to each other as they continued glancing at him out of the corner of their eyes.

In a hushed tone Colette said, “Il est tellement beau!” (tr: He’s so good looking!)

Suzanne whispered in return, “Il est vraiment grand.” (tr: He’s so big)

With some awe in her tone Colette whispered her agreement, “Oui, très grand.” (tr: Yes, very big.)

Still in a whisper Suzanne speculated, “Je me demande si c’est pareil pour le reste de son anatomie?” (tr: I wonder if he’s that big all over.)

Still in an awed tone Colette said, “Regardez son physique!” (tr: Look at his physique!)

With some anticipation in her tone and conviction that everything she said would happen Suzanne said, “J’ai hâte de découvrir son corps!” (tr: I can’t wait to check out his body!)

Whispering back and taking the stakes up a notch Colette replied, “J’ai hâte de le voir nu!” (tr: I can’t wait to see him naked!)

Suzanne snapped, “Attendre ton tour.” (Tr: Wait your turn.) The last comment was being made by Suzanne to exercising her privilege. She was the older twin by about 10 minutes and felt that she had first dibs on the men that came into their sphere of influence.

Any other man wouldn’t have been able to hear these comments. He had a smile on his face as he thought about what the girls were saying. For one thing they didn’t know that he spoke fluent French. For another they thought they were speaking softly enough that he wouldn’t hear them. <The twins are very pretty, and they are *very* French. I have a feeling that they’re going to be after me and that could be a problem. They aren’t Lois and that’s who I’m here for.> Still, their comments were making him blush, so he turned away from them so that they wouldn’t see it.

The only other reporter there was Claude Rocheret. At work Clark normally wore the GQ style suits whereas Claude had a dissipated somewhat slovenly look about him, almost as if he drank to excess. Claude had been watching the twins as they had made their overtures to Charlie, and he didn’t like it. Claude took an active and immediate dislike to Charlie because he resented the fact that the twins had never made over him in that fashion. After all, Claude saw himself as quite the ladies man, suave and sophisticated; yet every time he had approached either of the twins, he had been rebuffed.

Derek introduced Charlie to Claude. With a disapproving look on his face, Claude had refused to even shake hands with Charlie. Barely grunting an acknowledgement of the introduction by Derek, Claude sullenly turned away and went back to work.

Charlie was surprised at the obvious disrespect with which he had been treated by Claude and with a questioning look turned to Derek. Derek just gave a shrug and a shake of the head as if to

say that he wasn't going to excuse his behavior but didn't like it either. Charlie decided to get down to business. In a lower, conspiratorial tone he said, "Derek, I have heard some rumors of illegal shipments of arms to the rebels. I'm over here to check it out." <I wonder just how much detail I should reveal.> He answered himself, <Probably just enough to garner his cooperation.>

Claude was sitting with his back to them, but he overheard and thought, <That could have been *my* story. Why did *he* have to come *here*? *I* could have used a big story like that. It might have won an award. Then I could have moved from this dinky little office to a better position. I wonder if I could still get in on it?> He swung around in his chair to confront Charlie and spoke up with more than a little irritation in his voice, "You should 'ave just notified us and let us 'andle eet. Zare was no need for you to come 'ere. Zis ees our region of responsibility." Claude tried to add an ingratiating tone to his voice. "Zince you are 'ere, per'aps I could be of zum assistance. I do know zis region af-tair all."

Charlie replied stiffly "This investigation started in Metropolis, so *I'm* following through on it. I'm expecting to be joined later, and I don't think we'll need any help."

Claude saw that he probably wasn't going to be able to worm his way in on the story, so with a resentful look on his face, he returned to what he had been doing before Charlie had entered the office, thinking as he turned that he needed to find out more about Mr. Charles King.

Derek considered for a minute. He knew some of the hazards Charlie would be facing. He thought that he might be doing him a favor by discouraging him. "Well, Charlie, most of the rebels are located up in the Bantu country. You would have to go there and find them in the jungle in order to get more information about those kinds of things. That would be a difficult trip to start with and could take some time. If the shipment you're expecting to check on is due within, say, three months, you may not be able to get there, get the information, and get back in time, if you can *get* the information *at all and* if you can get out *alive*. I don't think that the rebels are going to be very cooperative in your investigation."

Charlie chuckled and said, "I have some sources of information that may be adequate to the task. Can I use this office as a home base, and do you have access to the internet or fax capability to the Metropolis office when I need it?" He said that knowing that he really was not going to need the fax, but the internet access could come in handy.

Derek replied, "Yes to both. Of course the internet access is done through a trans oceanic telephone line so there is some lag, but it gets the job done."

Charlie smiled in acknowledgement at the information, and then asked, "Is there a desk that isn't currently in use where I can 'hang my hat'?"

Derek, seeing that Charlie didn't wear a hat but realizing that it was simply a figure of speech, pointed to a desk in the corner with a telephone and an old typewriter on it and said, "That desk is unoccupied at the moment. You can use it."

Charlie said, "Thanks. I probably won't be keeping a strict schedule. It'll all depend on where the investigation leads. If I'm going to be gone for an extended period I'll try to let you know in advance. I plan to start trying to establish a group of informants. I'll keep you apprised of my progress." He started toward the door and said, "I'll see you later." And with that he departed.

After Charlie left, Derek was called out on business. Claude used this opportunity to compose and send a FAX to the Metropolis office. He was going to find out about this Charlie King.

Chapter 3 — The Mission Begins

Friday, January 3, 1992

Friday night Charlie started going around to some of the nightspots in Brazzaville. He planned to listen in on conversations in an attempt to find someone associated with the rebel cause. The first cabaret he went into was something of a disappointment. It was a real dive, frequented by a lower class of individual. The tour continued with the quality of establishment varying widely. He had some moderate success in the fifth cabaret he went into. He identified a couple of men in a corner booth speaking in hushed tones. They were talking about arms shipments. He couldn't determine if they were legal or otherwise, but he decided to follow up on them. Charlie was able to hear every word that was spoken and committed the appearance of each and the names mentioned to memory.

Then Charlie approached the bartender and asked about the men he had observed. Two 1000 CFA Franc bills, about \$40, changed hands as a bribe and got him the information he was after. It turned out that both men worked at an import company called L&M Enterprises, Inc. Charlie couldn't get over the fact that he had hit pay dirt so quickly. <I'll have to see how much information I can find on L&M on Monday.>

The next Monday Charlie went in to the office and asked, "Derek, I'd like to use a computer to do some internet research. Are there any available?"

"We only have a couple, and it looks like they are both in use. How urgent is this research?"

"It deals with the gun running investigation, but I guess it really isn't exactly what you would call urgent. Would you mind if I brought in another computer?"

"No. I wouldn't mind at all. Would you mind if we use it when you aren't here?"

"I wouldn't mind that at all. In fact, when I return to Metropolis, I'll leave it here for your use."

"That would be greatly appreciated. We're like the unwelcome step-child out here. They don't fund us very well."

"I promise that when I return to Metropolis, I'll talk to the powers that be about that. Since I've been here and seen what you do first hand and they are sitting over there in their ivory tower, I can give them an 'on the scene' report. I can't guarantee that it will make a difference, but I'll see just what I can do."

"Any help would be appreciated."

"You've got it. Right now I think I'll go see what I can find in the way of a computer." So saying, he exited. Charlie went to an electronics store and found a desk top computer for sale and bought it. When he got back to the office Derek helped him get it configured so that he had internet access.

Once the system was set up on his desk, Suzanne brought a chair over beside him and cozied up to him. Today she was wearing a bright red dress with a scoop neck which barely contained her breasts and a skirt so short that when she sat down and crossed her legs a small patch of white lace was visible at the junction of her legs.

The supposedly business-like instructions were conveyed in a husky contralto. She leaned against him as she typed in the number. "Charlot, Zee internet ees accessed wiss zee modem line. Zee number ees," she typed in the international telephone number. "Zee username ees 'reporter' and zee password ees 'Planet'." Furthermore, because of where she was sitting, next to him, she had to lean over to type in the commands which gave him a view down her top of her breasts. She obviously was there for more than one reason. Charlie was amazed. <Wow, and I thought I moved at superspeed, she's fast. The way she's dressed is very distracting. If she was showing me any more leg, I would be looking at her hip!> Trying desperately not to react overtly, he said, "Thank you Suzanne for helping me get started. I think I can handle it from here."

With a look of disappointment on her face, she said, “Charlot, eef you need anysang, anysang at all, please to let moi know.”
 “I’ll be sure to do that. Thanks again.”

Suzanne returned to her desk and pretended to resume her work, but really she was surreptitiously watching Charlie and anticipating a reaction from him.

Now that most of the distraction had been removed he was able to research L&M Enterprises, Inc. Being from 1997 when the information age had really been exploding, and it was possible to find just about anything with just a few mouse clicks, it was beyond frustrating to have to search and search and often wind up in a blind alley. To frequently not have the information available at all was really trying his patience. It took a while, but he eventually found out that L&M was incorporated in the US, and he found that they were headquartered in Metropolis. Since the arms shipment had originated in the port of Metropolis, this was no real surprise. He continued digging. L&M had an office and warehouses here in Brazzaville and port and warehouse facilities in Pointe Noire. Eventually he was able to get the names of the officers of the corporation. Among the names listed were Lex Luthor and Miranda Michaels, **L** and **M**.

Charlie stopped at this point and thought for a while. <Bingo! Lois told me about the problems she and Clark in the other universe had with Lex Luthor. It looks as though the parallels between our two universes are a lot closer than I thought. Lex Luthor wasn’t a problem in 1995 when I started at the Planet. I wonder what happened to him.> He had had some opportunities with Lois in both universes for her to tell him some of her and Clark’s history in that universe. Knowing that Lex had been behind most of the rackets in Metropolis and was also involved in some international criminal activities, it made sense that he would be behind this. He was convinced that he had hit pay dirt with this particular piece of information. Now he needed to get more definitive information on the shipment in question. For that it would be necessary to find the rebel stronghold.

Charlie made the rounds of the cabarets again that night. This time he didn’t pick up any useful information. <Well, I guess it’s time for **Superman** to do some snooping.>

The next day Charlie spent the day in the office doing more research. He was trying to find a ship date for the arms departing Metropolis without any success.

At lunchtime he was approached by Suzanne. She slinked over to his desk and leaned back against the edge with her bottom on the edge and her hands propped against the top. In this pose because her bottom was on his desk, her skirt rode up to a point just below the junction of her legs. She knew that she had a beautiful pair of legs, and she wanted to show off their full lusciousness, so she crossed them slowly and sensually. She thrust her breasts out and gave him a coy look as she asked, “Charlot, would you accompany moi for zee lunch? I can show you zum of zee nicair places to eat.”

Charlie thought, <Why not?> and took her up on her offer. They had a pleasant lunch together. At one point she had slipped off her shoe and used her bare foot to stroke his leg, wiggling her toes up under his pants leg. He had had a startled expression at this contact, and she had a sly expression on her face as she watched his reaction. As they finished the meal, she leaned over the table giving him an unencumbered view of her plenteous charms as she asked “Af’tair work eef you ‘ave nosing else to do, would you like to come to my apartment wis moi?”

Charlie was flustered as he thought, <Wow, these French girls don’t waste any time do they? It’s a tempting offer. However, I need to get ready for Lois. Maybe some other time.>

Charlie said, “Merci, mais j’ai d’autres choses à faire ce soir. Peut-être une autre fois.”

(Tr: “Thank you, but I have some other things I have to do this evening. Perhaps another time.)

Suzanne looked at him with a startled expression on her face. <Uh oh, he’s not like most of the other Americans I have met. He apparently doesn’t expect everyone to speak English like so many of his countrymen. He speaks French. I thought that like so many he only knew a little like how to say hello.> She said, “Charlot, vous parlez Français!” (Charlie, you speak French!) <Did he hear Colette and me the other day? His neck was turning red when he turned away. I wonder. Well, if he did, so much the better. Now I can be more open about my intentions.>

Charlie paid for the lunch, and they returned to the office.

When they returned, it was Colette’s turn. “Charlot, would you like to ‘ave zee evening meal wiss moi?”

“Colette, I have something else to do this evening. Perhaps we could have lunch together tomorrow?”

“Tres Bien, we weel have zee lunch tomorrow zen. Merci.”

Suzanne pulled Colette aside, and they spoke in whispers occasionally looking over at Charlie as they did. Charlie studiously avoided listening in on this conversation since it was obvious what, or actually **who** it was about.

At close of business he went out and had a meal and then went back to his suite. <Well, I need to find the rebel camp, and I’m not going to be able to do it sitting here in the hotel. I really need to start looking, but I can’t afford to be seen.> After it got dark he changed into some dark clothes — black slacks and a black turtle neck polo shirt. To this he added a black ski mask. Where he was going, he needed to be invisible against the night sky. Dressed this way, unless he passed between someone looking up and a star that they were looking at he would be nearly invisible. <This is almost like the pre-Lois days. I had to hide what I was doing so that no one would suspect what I was and what I could do.>

Clark had done his research before coming to the Congo and knew that the Congo River was the ninth longest river in the world, behind the Nile, the Amazon, and the Mississippi. That still made it a very long river. It drained the central African rainforest into the Atlantic Ocean. Like the Nile it had its cataracts, but unlike the Nile the cataracts of the Congo were all at the Atlantic end which blocked traffic upriver from the sea. Livingstone Falls were not as spectacular as Niagara, but they were still formidable.

Taking off from the roof of his hotel, he flew northeast until he crossed the Sangha River. Once he crossed the river, he started his search. <Let’s see. When I checked the maps of the area today, I saw that this tributary of the Congo cuts into the heart of the country. The camp could be anywhere in the interior. It would make sense that they would bring the cargo in by boat, so there must be at least some access to a river.> He remembered from his research that the area was predominately jungle, so it wouldn’t take much to hide even a large encampment. He established a grid pattern for his search which would thoroughly cover the area. The problem was that to thoroughly cover the area without allowing large swaths to be overlooked would take a considerable amount of time, even at superspeed, and superspeed was out of the question. Because of the jungle growth, he would be straining his vision powers the entire time. He was limited to less than half his normal superspeed so that he wouldn’t miss anything. Well, there was nothing for it but to get started. First he followed the north bank of the Sangha River from the point at which it flowed into the Congo River North Westward. He figured that if the rebels were going to be shipping in the goods, they might be located on the river so that they could move them easily. After crisscrossing the area above the river to a distance of ten kilometers, he had to call it a night and return to Brazzaville.

The next day Colette wasn’t going to let him forget that they had a date for lunch. She had decided that since her sister had failed to entice him to her apartment after work that she would have to try harder. Accordingly she wore a dress which was

extremely short and had a deeply scooped neckline.

She knew that she looked very attractive, and with her legs, which were second only to Suzanne in beauty, shown off to good effect, considerable décolletage, and no bra, she thought that she had a chance of enticing Charlie back to her apartment after work. Charlie was a prize that she was willing to go a considerable distance to obtain.

When she saw him arrive, she made sure that he was looking her way as she crossed her legs which hiked the hem of her dress just that much higher, practically giving him a view of her undergarments. Charlie, for his part, was more than somewhat flustered by this and found himself staring.

Seeing him stare at her, Colette couldn't repress a smile. She had made her point. Maybe she would succeed where her sister had failed. She muttered to herself, "Je pense avoir finalement accroché mon poisson ... Maintenant, je dois l'embobiner."

(Loosely translated that would be "I think I have hooked my fish. Now I need to reel him in.")

At lunch Charlie was very distracted. Not only was she making sure that he was noticing her legs, but every movement she made showed off not only her cleavage but because she was braless, her breasts moved and swayed with every movement of her body. Because of the cut of her neckline a considerable portion of breast was visible as well. Charlie was beginning to sweat by the end of lunch.

As they were finishing up she leaned over which allowed him an unobstructed view of both breasts.

In a very sultry tone she asked, "Charlot, do you like what you zee, mon petit chou? You know, you could zee even more. I would like to show you, everysang. Would you like to come to my apartment wiss moi ziss evening? We could have zum fun, we could make zee love togezaire."

Charlie had a hard time removing his eyes from the display to look into her eyes, but he finally managed. He stammered out, "J ... J'aim ... J'aimerais beaucoup, mais j'ai déjà quelque chose pour ce soir. Une autre fois peut-être?" (tr: "I would love to, but I have something else I must attend to this evening. Perhaps another time?")

Colette was clearly very disappointed. As she spoke she gave several little shimmies which sent seismic ripples through her breasts. "Charlot, tu ne sais pas ce que tu manques. Je pourrais te rendre très heureux."

(Tr: Charlie, you don't know what you're missing. I could make you very happy.)

"Je suis certain que vous pourriez, mais j'ai vraiment quelque chose à faire." (Tr: "I'm sure you could, but I do have something else to do.")

Her disappointment was evident in her expression; she had thought that she had succeeded where her sister had failed, but the fish had slipped the hook. Charlie paid for the lunch, and they returned to the office.

Suzanne and Colette had another conference in hushed tones. Charlie could tell that they were planning their next moves. <I feel like a gazelle being chased across the Serengeti by a couple of lionesses.>

The first night had been rather frustrating because he saw that this search could take an inordinate amount of time, but lacking any other alternative, he need to keep on going.

The second night was a repeat of the first night with the exception being that he travelled along the southern bank of the river and inland for approximately ten kilometers. Again he had no success.

For over two weeks he continued in this manner. Occasionally he would stop in the office to see if he could get a line on the arrival date of the shipment in question. Each day that he did was spent with Suzanne and Collette taking turns trying to get him home and in bed. Each night he would increase the

distance from the river so that he would move farther inland. Each night his frustration at not finding the rebel base increased. <Even steel has a breaking point. I hope I'm not reaching mine.>

He was starting to despair of finding the rebel camp before Lois arrived. < In order to cover more ground in the limited time I have available, I'll have to either open out the space between passes, which would mean skipping dozens of square kilometers on each pass or taking a radically different approach. I think it's time for a different approach. Since I had so much success when I cruised the bars in Brazzaville, I think I'll try that approach farther up river.>

Friday January 24, 1992

That night he tried going into Impfondo on the Oubangui River. After landing on the outskirts and walking into the town, he started going into the bars hoping to overhear a conversation about the rebels. He didn't have the same amount of luck here that he had had in Brazzaville, which made some sense since Impfondo was a smaller town.

When he had failed in Impfondo, he had decided that the next night he would move further up river to Dongou. Here he hit pay dirt. The third cabaret he went into was a real dive. <This bar is worse than any in Suicide Slum in Metropolis.> Still he stuck it out and was rewarded for his diligence. He overheard a conversation about the rebels' plans being carried on in hushed tones. <Now we're getting somewhere. I think I'll use Dongou as my center point for now. Now I need to find where they transship their supplies. The most logical route is still the river.>

Deciding to try a different approach, Charlie descended to 'wave top' level and followed the river north from Impfondo to above Dongou and this time scanned the north west river bank looking for a dock or pier. He was ten kilometers north of Dongou when he found it. It was a small pier, and it had a camouflage net strung over it so that it would be hard to see from the air. Once he spotted it he zoomed up higher and looked down on it. Now that he knew what he was looking for it was easy to spot. He then scanned the jungle immediately inland and was able to detect a track or trail through the undergrowth. It looked like it hadn't been used recently, but it had been used frequently enough that it hadn't grown back over. It hadn't been made by any vehicles. It was obviously a footpath as it was not wide enough for anything other than a motorcycle. Unfortunately it was time to return to Brazzaville. He would have to return the following night.

Since Charlie had found the pier the previous night and identified the trail he needed to follow, he was able to return to it easily. He thought that logically, all he needed to do was follow the trail to the camp. How hard could that be?

Much to his frustration once he had picked it up again, it wasn't as easy as he had thought it would be. There were a number of side trails branching off of the main trail, and it was difficult to know which one was the main trail to follow. He decided to stick to the trail that appeared to be the heaviest traveled. If that didn't lead directly to the rebel camp he could always come back and follow the side trails.

From altitude it was easier to follow the trail. He followed it west from the river for almost one hundred kilometers, through the jungle and across the grasslands and almost into the foothills where he finally came across the camp. Not surprisingly as it turned out it was the most direct route to the river and the pier was at the point of closest approach. He was relieved. <If I hadn't heard that conversation in Dongou, I might not have found the rebel camp before Lois' arrival. Okay, now it's time to do some spying. I'll have to start that later.> He needed to return to Brazzaville before there was a chance he would be seen as he wasn't dressed for daytime spying. In his dark outfit he would be

easy to spot against the brightening sky.

Chapter 4 — Mayson Drake

Lois wasn't due in for another six and a half weeks. He thought, <I could probably afford to take some time to become more familiar with the environs of Brazzaville.> Since everyone knows that dining and touring is more pleasant when in company than when alone, he decided that he should have some company. Personal experience had taught him about being alone in a very painful way. Ever since being exposed as Superman he had been basically alone and lonely. The only woman he had opened up to about who he was and what he could do had insisted that he deny all of that and be 'normal'. Lois had returned to her universe, and then there was Mayson.

This caused him to start to reminisce.

1996 and 1997

When the other Lois had shown him how to be Superman, Lana had flipped out. She had given him an ultimatum — it was her or Superman. Since he couldn't deny who and what he was, she had called off the wedding and had left him. Soon after that the other Lois had left as well. He could actually understand her desire to return to her own Clark, but that didn't prevent him from wanting her to stay there with him. That was the point when he had become truly **alone**.

Shortly after Lois' departure with H. G. Wells, Clark had determined to try to find his Lois. In between rescues, captures, and work at the Daily Planet, he would press his investigation in the Congo. Fortunately the time change made this very convenient. Most of the time when it was night in Metropolis, it was daytime in the Congo.

Clark went to the HR department of the Planet and obtained a copy of her employee photo which was a passport sized picture. He started his inquiry at the airport and confirmed her arrival but that was as far as he was able to follow her.

It was like she disappeared into thin air. He knew the bare bones of the story so he proceeded into the Bantu country and pressed his inquiry there, coming up empty everywhere he asked. He checked in every native village in the area. No one had seen a woman looking like the one in the photo. Not a single hotel desk clerk was able to confirm her presence after looking at the picture. He failed to take into account the various shifts at the desk. If he had checked every clerk working at each hotel, specifically the Bonne Nuit de Sommeil, he might have talked to the clerk that actually was on duty when Charlie took the room for Lois. There were a couple of possibilities. The first one would be that he was off shift when Clark came through. The second would be that he might have moved on to other employment. It was a hasty visit, and if he had lingered, someone on staff **might** have recognized him as Charlie King, the man who had rented 501 for so long. All in all a rather simple check but his anxiety and lack of sleep were making him sloppy.

There was one unusual incident. Well into the second month of his search he was passing a shop, and the proprietor hailed him. "Charlot, mon ami, I 'aven't zeen you een years. Where 'ave you been?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sure you have mistaken me for someone else. My name is Clark."

"Mon Dieu, but you look yust lak a zerry good customer of mine. Ah well, zay say zat everyone 'as a tween."

Clark started to wonder if perhaps a Clark from another universe had visited here previously but passed it off as a case of mistaken identity. Actually the lack of sleep brought about by his nocturnal activities was taking a toll on his performance. If he had been more on his game, he might have followed up on that chance encounter and found out that the Charlie that was being greeted was Charlie King, his undercover name, which might

have just led him to show the shop owner the photo of Lois. Still determined to keep up the search he continued, but after something over two months as far as he could determine, there were no stones left to turn over, so he finally gave up. He didn't realize it, but he had missed a number of clues.

Clark continued with this activity for a number of months. When he finally gave up and started getting some rest, things didn't improve; in fact he went into a not-so-mild state of depression. He lost interest in eating. He rarely socialized with anyone, even Perry and Alice White. They did invite him over for the occasional dinner. Most of the time he just begged off claiming that he needed to be available for rescues or some other flimsy excuse. He would spend the majority of his time brooding in his apartment. He found himself thinking a lot about Lois, the only Lois he actually knew.

Even knowing that that Lois was unattainable didn't dim the attraction he felt for her. If there had been a way to travel to the other universe and snatch her away from his doppelganger and make her happy, he would have done it. But there was the problem, making her happy. How to do that was the problem. She was equally or even perhaps, based on what she had told him, more strongly attracted to his doppelganger than to him. He would sit for hours and dwell on the time that they had had together. How she had cared for him and had saved him from the Kryptonite. How she had trusted him and believed in him. How she had taught him to be true to himself. The more he thought about her, the more depressed he got, knowing that **she** was never to be his and that he had not been able to find **his** Lois.

Clark threw himself even more completely into his work. He still had 'friends' of a sort. There was still Mayor White and some of the staff at the Planet, but there was absolutely no one that he was what you would call close to. Perry noted his demeanor and mentioned it a few times and tried to draw him out to no avail.

Because of his powers, most people were in awe of him and were very standoffish. They weren't sure that they could trust him with his powers, even though up until he was outted by Tempus, he had passed as totally human and was even engaged to be married! People could be so myopic at times. The ultimate result had been that he didn't have anyone that he could rely on; there was no one that he could talk to about personal matters when he needed to.

At work it was like he was being tolerated and watched all the time. It was as if his coworkers were just waiting to see him do something super. Each time that he got up from his desk and ran into the stairwell they knew that he was going off on a rescue or to break up a robbery or some such other super activity. Within seconds of his entering the stairwell, they would often hear a sonic boom indicating that he was on his way to the rescue. Everyone knew that when he returned he would be typing up another Superman story for the front page.

He tried to keep the two sides of his life separate, making sure that he never did anything super when in his civilian clothes, which was difficult at times, but he did his best. That actually was one of the hardest things to accomplish. When he had been with Lana before the suit, he had been in the habit of just operating from concealment. In fact, just before Lois came on the scene, he had ducked into an alley and used his heat vision to flatten the tires of a getaway car so that the police could make the capture. He sometimes still found himself doing those kinds of things just to avoid some of the notoriety of being who he was.

Even with that there was the other side of the coin. There were women that wanted him **because** of what he was. They were no better or worse than the groupies that follow rock bands around the country on tour. Actually he guessed that he probably had more than his fair share of those. He would see them at every announced appearance clamoring for an autograph or just to touch him. Sometimes it got a little rough with the women

jostling for position. Sometimes, fortunately not very frequently, some would even bare their breasts like the women at rock concerts and throw their bras at him. Those incidents only served to reinforce to him the fact that Clark was really normal or perhaps super-normal human because like any other man he was very attracted to the female form, and when opportunities such as that presented themselves, his eyes were drawn to the display although he tried not to stare overtly. At times he was concerned that he was going to embarrass himself with his very physical response. That spandex suit wasn't very good at concealing that. He was very careful when using his supervision that he didn't intrude on anyone's privacy. It would be so easy to abuse his powers in that way, but the only woman he really ***wanted*** and longed to look at was his Lois.

Clark got a lot of fan mail. He tried to answer all of it, especially that letters he got from kids. When answering those, he always tried to encourage them to set high ideals, be good to others and help out wherever they could. If they wrote to him about being bullied, he encouraged them, not to fight but still not to give in, telling them that they should let those in authority know what was happening and not take matters into their own hands. He got a lot of mail from unmarried and sometimes even married women which frequently contained a piece of intimate apparel with an offer of a sexual liaison. These letters he did ***not*** answer. He would usually collect these items of apparel for a time and then anonymously donate them to a women's shelter.

There had been a few occasions where nubile young women had put themselves into precarious situations and yelled for his help just so that he would rescue them. Oftentimes while he had them in his arms, they would start to kiss him, and he had a hard time getting free of them, but there were no meaningful relationships, and he had always held out the hope that he could still find ***his*** Lois.

That had even clouded the relationship that had started to develop with Mayson Drake.

Clark had partially pulled out of his depression by throwing himself into his work. As a result he had been working very closely with the police department on an organized crime case both as an investigative reporter and as Superman. Mayson Drake had been the assistant DA sent over as liaison for that case. Initially she had made no bones about the fact that she didn't like vigilantism and one vigilante in particular. However, since the police seemed to appreciate his assistance, she was tolerating his presence, but she limited very severely her interaction with him. As far as she was concerned, the less she had to deal with him the better. Any interaction she had with him was rather stilted and formal. It was always Mr. Kent since he always showed up in his civilian clothes. Over the course of the case, however, she saw just how closely he cooperated with the police and how he was very diligent to follow the rules of evidence. So slowly her opinion was changed, and she stopped seeing him as a vigilante and more as an adjunct police officer without credential.

Flashback July 31, 1996

Mayson and Clark had been in her office going over some of the depositions which had been collected one day. She still had some reservations about his activities and decided to beard the lion in his den, so to speak since it was ***her*** office. Seeing that it was after twelve noon she asked, "Mr. Kent, I would like to discuss some things with you. Could we possibly take a break and have the discussion over lunch?"

"If that's what you would like to do Ms. Drake, that's fine with me. Do we need to take any of these files with us?"

Looking down at the materials spread out on her desk she thought about that for a few seconds and replied, "No, I don't think so. We can get back to this later."

Clark offered, "Around the corner is a little place called 'Travaglino's' that has some of the best Linguini with clam sauce I've ever had. Do you feel like having pasta?"

Mayson replied, "I simply adore Travaglino's. Sure, let's go."

A short time later Clark Kent and Mayson Drake were sitting at a sidewalk café table.

As their waiter approached the table, Mayson stood up. The waiter threw his arms around her and gave her a kiss. He said, "Hey, Mayson where ya been? I ain't seed youze in a couple'o weeks."

Mayson started to laugh, "I've been busy on a case, Tony."

Tony looked at Clark and said, "Ain't I seed youze around here b'for?" Turning back to address Mayson he asked, "Is he workin' wid you or is dis social?"

Laughing even harder Mayson looked at Clark and then back at Tony and said, "A little bit of both."

Tony gave Clark the eye and then said to him, "Youze better take good care 'o her or you answer to me. Capice?"

By this point Mayson was laughing so hard she could hardly speak, but she managed to get out, "Tony, it's not like that. Besides, do you know who this is? This is ***Clark Kent***, you know, ***Superman***."

Tony replied, "I don't care 'oo 'e is. If 'e don't treat you nice, 'e'll answer t' me."

Mayson turned to Clark and said "Clark Kent, please allow me to introduce Tony Travaglino, my cousin." She slugged him in the arm and said, "Tony is a little over protective, if you know what I mean, and he thinks it's funny to give people the impression that an ADA has relatives in the Mafia. He doesn't really talk like that, it's all a put on."

Clark stuck out his hand and said "Pleased to meet you Tony. I assure you that my intentions are honorable."

Tony replied, "Nice to meet you. I can't help it; I like to tease Mayson. We practically grew up together; she's more like a sister than a cousin. We're all kinda proud of her, being an Assistant DA and all." Turning to Mayson he said, "What'll it be, your usual?"

"Sure Tony, the usual."

"What would you like Superman?"

Clark said, "Please call me Clark. I'll have the linguini with clam sauce, please." Tony left them alone.

Tony came out a couple of minutes later with a bottle of Chianti which he put it on the table and said, "Compliments of the house."

While waiting for the food to be delivered Mayson asked, "Okay, what should I call you? In the office I usually use your name, but ***is*** that appropriate? You just told Tony to call you Clark, so do I call you Mr. Kent or Clark or Superman?"

He laughed at the question and replied, "Actually, I get that a lot. The simple explanation is Clark Kent is who I am, and Superman is what I can do. I grew up being just Clark Kent, so if I'm in my street clothes, I'm Clark Kent. If I'm in the uniform, I'm Superman. If you want to, you can call me Clark."

Mayson waited while Clark took the time to open the Chianti bottle and pour two glasses before asking, "Okay, Clark, you say that Superman is what you can do. But, ***why*** do you do it? What drives you to ***be*** Superman? What's your ... motivation?"

Just about that time, Tony delivered their orders. When the orders arrived, Mayson had spaghetti with red sauce and meat balls.

After Tony left they resumed the conversation. "Well, Mayson; may I call you Mayson?" She nodded her approval. "Well Mayson, I was raised on a farm in Kansas. I guess that you could say that I simply have the values of a Kansas farmer. Help your neighbor. Be good to others. Obey the law and be a good citizen. A rather simplistic set of values, but ones that if more

people adopted them, wouldn't the world be a better place?"

Mayson had speared one of her meatballs with her fork and cut it in two before putting a portion in her mouth. While she chewed, she thought about what he had said. Finally she answered, "I can't argue with that philosophy at all. But, ***why*** do you get yourself involved? You could just sit on the sidelines and watch us as we destroy ourselves."

Clark had taken a forkful of the linguini and swallowed before answering. "Mayson, when I first started to develop my powers, my parents were concerned that the government would lock me away in a lab and study me, so they urged me to hide what I could do. As more of my powers developed, it became harder and harder for me to sit back and do nothing when I knew that I could do something positive which would end up preventing serious injury or death. I feel that my powers are a gift but not to me, to all mankind. I feel that I was sent here to help. As long as I am able to, that is exactly what I'll do, help in any way that I can."

Mayson took a sip of her Chianti before she asked, "Okay, I can see that, but why the vigilante route? Why not go into crime fighting, full time by becoming a member of the force?"

Clark sat his fork down. In some respects he displayed some Italian characteristics in that he used his hands a lot to emphasize what he was saying. "That would actually limit me in what I could do. There are so many things that I do that are not associated with law enforcement that limiting myself to police work would make me feel like I was neglecting the other aspects of what I see as my part time job." He started ticking off items on his fingers as he started enumerating them. "Rescuing people from burning structures, from collapsing buildings, from mud slides, from hurricanes, and tornados ... I could go on and on." He threw his arms out as if to encompass the world. "There is also the fact that if I became a member of the force I could be perceived as a representative of the U. S. whenever I assist in international incidents. In that respect I must remain neutral, not representing any single country but mankind in general."

This had been a new revelation to Mayson, and she said in a somewhat awed tone, "I guess I can see that. Wow, all of those activities, all those rescues, it must actually make you feel good when you save so many lives."

"It is tremendously rewarding in and of itself. The satisfaction in knowing that as a result of my actions this individual will live to see another day, it's extremely gratifying."

After having had another sip of her wine, she sat the glass down. She had been thinking about all of the reports of his activities. She seemed to recall some reports of dead bodies being recovered. Mayson got a somewhat concerned expression as she asked, "But ... you don't ***always*** get there in time, ***do*** you? I mean ... you can't ***always*** get there before someone has died, ***do*** you?"

A very sad look came over his face as he answered, "No Mayson, no ... I don't. No matter ***how*** much I try sometimes I'm just not there soon enough ... or I'm not ***fast*** enough to get to everyone in time. Sometimes there are just too ***many***. No matter how ***hard*** I try ... sometimes it just isn't enough."

Mayson could see the unshed tears well up in his eyes and moved by his apparent sadness reached out and placed her hand on his arm and said, "Nobody's perfect. You expect too much of yourself if you expect to rescue ***everyone*** ***every*** time. You need to cut yourself some slack. You can only do so much and whatever you ***can*** do has to be enough. Look at it this way, if you ***hadn't*** been there ***at all***, how many of those you did save ***would*** have died? I have to admit that you do a lot of good. I've been more than a little down on you because of your apparent vigilantism, but I think I'm starting to see things more from ***your*** point of view now. You do a tremendous lot of good, and you get very little recognition for the good that you do.

I wish that there was something I could do for you. You are obviously a very caring person. I can see that from what you've said. I can see that it tears you up when someone ***dies*** because of your self-perceived failings. Do you have ***anyone*** that you can talk to? You know, when things don't go quite right. Do you have any close friends ... a girlfriend perhaps?"

Mayson could see the sadness in his expression as he replied, "No, Mayson, I don't. I ***was*** engaged to be married, but she broke it off when I decided to go public with what I could do. It hurt when she did that, but what else could I do? There is only so much I could do from the shadows, and it wasn't enough. Too many people ***died*** ... because I was afraid to come out in the open. It was a ... a sacrifice ... that I had to make."

These revelations had given Mayson new insight into this man she was with. She took another sip of her wine while she thought. Now she was seeing him as less a vigilante and more as a selfless, caring man who felt a compulsion to help in any way that he could and considering just who he was and what he could do, that was a lot. He had been very correct when he had said that if more people lived by his values that the world would be a better place, it could almost be called Utopia.

They had both managed to finish up at about the same time. Clark called for the check. Tony came over and said, "The management, namely me, has decided that since you were here with Mayson, this meal was on the house."

Clark replied, "Thank you, Tony. The meal was delicious."

"Tell your friends. We depend on word of mouth advertising."

"I'll do that. Thanks again."

Reverting to his Mafia style speech he replied, "Doan mention it," and laughed as he turned away with the dirty dishes in hand.

As a result of this time with him and their discussion, Mayson had gotten a new perspective on this man, and she came to a decision. She asked, "Clark, would you consider me very forward if I invited you to dinner?"

"To discuss the case?"

"No ... I'd like to discuss ***you*** some more. I'd like to get to ***know*** you better."

"Uh, Mayson, I don't know if that would be a real good idea. You might be very disappointed."

Mayson thought about his statement for a few seconds before answering. "No, I ***don't*** think I will be." She took out one of her business cards and wrote her address on the back. Handing it to him she said, "Can you come over at 7:30 Friday? I make a mean lasagna. It's from an old family recipe."

"I think I'd like that. Okay, 7:30 Friday." He pocketed the card.

Flashback TBC

Chapter 5 — Dating Mayson

Flashback continues — Friday August 2, 1996

Clark arrived promptly at 7:30. As Mayson opened the door to greet him, the delicious smells of pasta wafted out to greet him. He held out a bottle of wine to her. Mayson reached out to take the bottle of wine from his hands and taking his hand in her free one pulled him into the foyer. She looked at the wine, "Italian red?"

"I stopped on my way and picked it up at a little shop I know in Rome." He took a deep sniff, "I detect an absolutely delicious aroma."

"If you think it smells good, just wait until you have a taste. You're going to think you've died and gone to heaven, even if I do say so myself."

"If it tastes half as good as it smells, I'm sure that'll be the case."

"Flattery? Is that the Kansas farm boy talking or the

Metropolis sophisticate?”

Laughing he replied, “Kansas farm boy all the way! A Kansas farm boy can appreciate good food just like any gourmet.”

“Well, okay mister Kansas farm boy gourmet, let’s eat. Why don’t you open the wine while I get the lasagna?”

To her amazement Clark took the bottle and gave it a blast with his supercold breath to chill it and then opened the wine and poured two glasses as they sat down to the meal. At his first forkful Clark simply closed his eyes and got a very dreamy expression on his face. His appreciation of the lasagna was evident. “This is absolutely the ***best*** lasagna I have ***ever*** tasted.”

“More flattery?”

“By no means! Superman ***always*** speaks the truth. In my considered opinion I have never tasted better and that’s the truth!”

Laughing she said, “Then I guess I have to accept your statement as fact.”

They enjoyed a pleasant meal, and they both enjoyed the conversation during which they maintained the earlier somewhat bantering tone. After dinner they relaxed on her couch.

Mayson started the conversation in a somewhat more serious tone, “At lunch you told me that you had been engaged. So, Clark, tell me about your engagement. How did you feel when she broke it off?”

“Well, I was engaged to Lana Lang, my high school sweetheart. She was afraid that if the government found out what I could do that they would lock me away and study me. She was afraid to lose me to the government after we were married and wanted me to hide what I could do, but I just couldn’t do that. I found myself helping from the shadows. We were planning the wedding when Lois showed up. I felt a strange attraction to her. It was like she was the woman I was supposed to be with, not Lana. Lois had worked at the Planet and had been missing for a number of years on assignment. She suddenly reappeared and inexplicably knew about me. She’s the one that made the suit for me and helped with my debut. When I went public, Lana couldn’t handle it and called off the wedding. This Lois was actually from another dimension and shortly after my debut she left. The day she left was the saddest day of my life. Even worse than the day my parents were killed. It felt like my heart had been ripped out.”

Mayson looked on him with empathy in her eyes.

He continued, “I have to admit that this has been a very lonely time for me. My fiancée had left me, and the woman I was attracted to like no other had left. I literally had no one. It’s been quite a few months. I also have to admit I have been spending a lot of time dwelling on it. I’ve been doing my job at the Planet, helping the police on this investigation, and pursuing rescues. A lot of nights I still spend flying to the Congo and searching for Lois Lane.”

“Why are you looking for her in the Congo? Is that where she went when she left? Why are you spending so much time looking for her?”

“It gets complicated. When I met Lois I felt an immediate attraction to her like the way iron filings are attracted to a magnet. She assured me that if I ever found her again that we would be drawn together by an even stronger pull. I decided that I needed to find her, and I’ve been looking and looking. I’m beginning to give up hope. She’s been missing for over three years. The trail has been stone cold.”

“Isn’t there anyone else that you can be attracted to?”

“I don’t know. All I know is what I felt when I was in the presence of the one I was with for that short time.”

Somewhat shyly she asked, “How about me? Would I have a chance?”

“I don’t know, Mayson. At this point we don’t know each other very well. I do like you, but it’s not the same thing. We

could give it a try, but I can’t promise anything.”

“I’m not asking for any promises. I’m starting to like you, and I just want to see how things can work out. If you’re willing to give it a try, so am I.”

They spent the next couple of hours talking and then Clark heard an emergency call for a fire in Suicide Slum and had to depart. As he was about to leave Mayson said, “I’ve enjoyed our time together. Let’s do it again.”

Clark replied, “Next time I’ll have you over to my place. I make a pretty decent stir fry. How about Sunday at 7:30?”

“It’s a date. I’ll see you then.”

“Maybe I should pick you up. I can get us into my place without the paparazzi spotting you. I don’t think you want the notoriety of being seen dating me.”

“Does that mean that I get a chance to fly with you?”

“Yeah, of course it means that.”

“Good, I’ll look forward to it. I’ll see you Sunday, bye!”

“I’ll pick you up, bye.”

That had started a relationship which had grown over the course of the months.

One Friday evening Mayson was at home and had just finished her shower and was in the process of dressing for their date. So far they had managed to keep their relationship a secret by either him coming to her place for dinner or him picking her up to fly back to his place or else to some more remote location where he was less likely to be recognized. Tonight Clark was going to be picking her up, so she was putting on the finishing touches, a little dab of perfume here and there. She had the TV on LNN in the background when the abrupt change of scene caught her eye. She grabbed the remote and turned up the volume when she saw that they were reporting on Superman.

She saw Clark as he was rescuing peons from a mud slide which had occurred in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. A number of the hovels of the peons had been washed right down the hillside with the occupants. Clark had already rescued over a dozen and was digging for more. After rescuing over twenty, what he started bringing out were not survivors but dead bodies.

She watched in horror as he started bringing out a family, parents and six children, all dead. Her worst fear had come to pass. She had known, ever since that first lunch, just how sensitive he was to failed rescues and most especially children. She knew that he would be late returning and that their date would be postponed, but she also realized that he was going to need someone to comfort him after this event.

Just on the off chance that she would need it, he had given her a key to his apartment, and she knew that this was the time for her to use it. She would be there waiting for him when he returned and be a shoulder for him to cry on.

She also knew that she would never be able to get past the paparazzi, and their secret would be compromised, but his welfare was more important to her than their secret. She would deal with the notoriety, but she had to be there for him when he got back.

She grabbed her coat and bag and headed out the door. She drove up and parked in front of his apartment, and as soon as she got out of the car, she was mobbed by the paparazzi, snapping her picture and shouting questions. Many of them were shouting to get her name until one of the reporters who had been on the courthouse beat recognized her.

As she reached the top of the steps leading up to his apartment and she pulled out her key he shouted, “Assistant DA Drake, are you dating Superman? How long have the two of you been dating? How did you meet? Are you getting serious? Are the two of you getting married?”

She turned around after unlocking his door and addressed the crowd, “Yes, I’m dating ***Clark Kent***.” She emphasized the use

of his name. As soon as she had started speaking a hush had fallen over the crowd of paparazzi gathered at the bottom of the stairs as they gave her their full attention. She continued, “and we have been seeing one another for a while now. Right now I need to go into the apartment and get ready for him to return. He’s in Honduras right now on a very difficult rescue, and when he returns he is going to need to be comforted.”

“Your crowd really disgusts me! You hound him and hound him! You don’t care anything about him aside from a sensational story like is he dating someone, and if he is, who is it? You don’t care anything about the man inside the suit. The very caring and compassionate man in the suit that suffers greatly when he has to deal with death, death that he blames himself for, even though he isn’t responsible. He beats himself up every time he can’t get there soon enough, or he isn’t fast enough to keep **everyone** safe. He blames himself unnecessarily, but he still blames himself. If you want a real story, tell about his compassion, how much he cares for all of us and is torn up every time someone dies. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to be there for him when he returns.” She turned and entered his apartment closing the door behind her.

As soon as the door was closed, she just leaned back against it to try to calm her jitters, and the tears came. She had been able to hold them at bay while she addressed the hounds, but now she was able to release the floodgates. She had been shaking with the emotion she had been putting into her statement to the paparazzi.

After a few minutes she was able to leave the support of the door and move down the steps into his living room. Fortunately there was a banister for her to hold on to for support and guidance while her vision cleared. She dropped her coat over the back of a chair and her bag on top of it and grabbing the remote turned on the TV and tuned in to LNN.

She saw that he was still pulling dead bodies out of the mud. At this point there were almost as many dead as there were alive. The local network providing the feed for LNN was able to zoom in on Superman for a close up of his face as he was bringing out one of the final bodies, that of a child, a girl of about eight years of age. The look of anguish on his face tore into her heart.

She hadn’t said anything about it to him, keeping her feelings to herself, not trusting her emotions, but seeing him and his anguish, her heart went out to him, and she realized that she was actually falling in love with him. <This man, this very gentle man, this man of infinite compassion and almost limitless strength.> She resolved that she wouldn’t tell him, at least not yet, and she settled in to watch and wait. She didn’t want to add yet another burden to his already staggering load.

After another half hour she saw that the rescue effort was coming to an end. Superman was conferring with local rescue officials, and after a couple of minutes she saw him lift off into the sky, and she knew that he was on his way home. Intuitively she knew she needed to calm herself and dry her tears so that she could present a brave front for him and allow him to vent.

Five minutes later she heard him land on the balcony. She got up from the couch where she had been watching the TV and moved to his bedroom just as he was coming in through the French doors. He had heard the TV, but the meaning really hadn’t registered, and until she was standing there in front of him, he didn’t realize that he wasn’t alone. As soon as he saw her, he reacted to her presence by looking toward the living room where she had come from with a questioning look.

“I saw what you were doing on LNN and came over to be here for you.” Stepping closer she put her arms around his neck and pulled him down into a kiss.

He tried to keep her from doing it saying, “Don’t Mayson, I’m covered in mud.”

Disregarding his remark and her finery, moving closer she tightened her arms around his neck and pulled herself in closer

and initiated a kiss.

Clark relented and kissed her in relief.

Mayson then deepened the kiss, which was rapidly turning into a raging inferno.

By the time they broke from the kiss, Mayson was almost as muddy as Superman, but she didn’t care. She took his hand and led him to the bathroom. She unzipped his suit and took it off of him and then removed her soiled dress.

Standing there in her bra, panties, and slip she said, “Do you need an engraved invitation? We both need a shower. You can go first or I can ... or ... we could share. What’ll it be?”

Chapter 6 — Clark’s Birthday

Flashback continues — Friday August 2, 1996

Reaching in he turned on the water, and the next thing she knew, she was naked in the shower with an equally naked Clark with the water pouring over her. She stepped up to him and put her arms around him again and just held him close while the water cascaded over her back. After a few minutes she grabbed the soap and lathered up her hands and started washing him.

This delicate and yet intimate contact did a lot to wash away the anguish he had felt during the rescue, and he allowed her to continue with her ministrations.

When she had explored all of his body, it was his turn, and taking the soap from her, he lathered up his hands and started washing her. He lingered over her breasts and as his hands traveled down across her stomach, he leaned in claiming her lips again.

After a time they rinsed off and took turns drying each other with fluffy towels and then dressing in robes moved into the living room. They cuddled for a time on his couch.

After a time he said, “Sorry about dinner. How did you get in past the paparazzi?”

“I’m afraid I blew our secret, but I had to be here for you and that was more important.”

“I’m glad you were here. I can’t tell you how much better I feel.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She could tell that he was thinking about what he had been through because she could see the tears welling up in his eyes even before he said a single word.

Finally he said, “It never gets any easier, no matter how many times I get there and find that there are fatalities. The kids are the worst. They’re never going to grow up and love and have children of their own. Their lives have been snuffed out far too soon.” He was openly crying by this point, and she pulled him down into an embrace and simply patted his back as he vented his emotions comforting him as best she could. Eventually he calmed down and pulled back, looking her in the eyes he said, “Thank you.” Just that but it carried a whole lot of meaning beyond the obvious.

After a few more minutes he said, “Sorry about our date, I’m afraid I’ve ruined your dress.”

“It’ll wash up. That’s not important. What was important was being here for you.”

“I can at least make you some dinner, stir fry okay?”

“I’d love it.”

They had moved ahead but had not crossed the intimacy barrier.

Friday, February 28, 1997

On Friday Mayson was supposed to be at Clark’s for dinner to celebrate his birthday. A deposition had taken longer than anticipated, and so she had been delayed at the office. She decided that since she was so late that she didn’t have time to go home and change before showing up at Clark’s apartment, so she drove directly there from the office. Dressed as she was in her

business suit, the paparazzi almost didn't give her a second look. After all she wasn't dressed for a date; she was dressed like an assistant DA for heaven's sake. After she made it through the paparazzi gauntlet, and Clark had let her in, she let out a relieved sigh. As soon as the door was closed behind her she threw her arms around his neck, and they kissed. They just stood there just inside the door kissing for several minutes. Mayson broke the kiss only long enough to say, "Happy Birthday."

When they broke from their clinch Clark said, "Why don't we move to the couch? It should be more comfortable than standing here in front of the door." They proceeded to cuddle on the couch for a while. They had progressed to the point where they were doing a lot of petting, but they had not crossed that intimacy threshold, and she was starting to feel some frustration with that. She had been trying to think of a way to move their relationship ahead to that next level.

Clark asked, "How hungry are you?"

She said, "I could stand to wait a while, but I could do with a glass of wine."

"Comin' right up." He went into the kitchen and returned with a couple of glasses and a bottle of red wine. He knew that Mayson always got a kick out of this little trick, so he gave it a blast of supercold breath to chill it before he opened it, and then he poured two glasses and they settled in with her leaning against his chest. His arm was draped over her shoulder, the tips of his fingers just brushing the swell of her right breast.

After finishing that first one, he had refilled the glasses. She started feeling rather mellow. She said, "I came straight from the office, so I didn't have time to change. Could I borrow something of yours to change into so that I could be a little more comfortable?"

"Sure, I have sweats and stuff in the bedroom. Help yourself. I'll go start the stir fry."

While Clark went into the kitchen, Mayson went into the bedroom and started going through his drawers. She found his sweats and such but decided that that wasn't what she wanted to put on. She went to his closet and found one of his button down shirts hanging up. She took it off the hanger and held it up in front of herself and looked in the mirror. <Yep, this will do.>

She removed her suit, and after thinking about it for a couple of minutes, she went into his bathroom and took a quick shower. When she had dried off, she pulled on his shirt and only buttoned the bottom two buttons. Then she rolled the sleeves up to her elbows. Standing in front of the mirror, she admired herself. The shirttails came down just far enough to cover her pubic area and not much more, and the sides revealed all of her legs to the hip. The front gaped open revealing her cleavage and the inner swell of both breasts. <Let's see if this doesn't move this relationship to the next level.>

Barefoot she padded into the kitchen and stepped up behind Clark. She put her arms around his waist locking her hands in the front. He said, "Dinner will be ready in just a few minutes."

"That's okay, I can wait." She stretched up and started kissing the back of his neck.

He finished the stir fry and turned to put it on the plates. When she released her hold on him and stepped back so that he could dish the meal out, he stopped in his tracks. He was frozen in place by the sight of her. She was sexy and enticing, and he couldn't take his eyes off of her. He hadn't expected this in the slightest. Mayson in sweats, yes, Mayson nearly naked, no.

Obviously pleased with the effect her attire had had on him, she chuckled as she said, "The stir fry is going to get cold."

He shook himself and brought his mind back to what he was supposed to be doing. He ladled out the stir fry onto their plates, and she carried them to the table.

He watched her legs as she walked to the table the shirt swaying with her movements. As she sat down the shirt gaped

open even more than it had been, and he could see the majority of her breasts. He started to sweat, and he had a hard time concentrating on his meal because his eyes were on her the entire time.

When they finished up and cleared the plates, Mayson took his hand and led him to his bedroom. She grasped the hem of his shirt and pulled it off of him, and then reaching down she pushed his sweats down around his ankles. He stepped out of them automatically his eyes on her the entire time.

She lay down on his bed and pulled him down beside her. She said, "I think it's past time that we moved this relationship to the next level." As she said this, she unbuttoned the two buttons at the bottom of the shirt and pulled it open. She took his hands and placed them on her breasts, and as she did, she let out a contented sigh. Reaching down she insinuated one of her hands under the waistband of his briefs. With her other hand she pulled his face down to hers, and she initiated a deep kiss which took both of their breaths away for a time.

All during this time their hands had been busy. Mayson knew that he was just as excited as she was and attempted to entice him into further action, however he demurred.

He said, "I'm sorry, I just can't do this. I want to, but I can't," and returned his hand to its ministrations.

Weeping in frustration she said, "Clark, you can't do this to me. I want you, I need you. Please, love me."

Clark moved his hand back to her center and said, "I'm sorry Mayson, I want to, it's just, it's just not right. I like you ... I like you a *lot*, but it's just not the same. Mayson, I'm sorry, but if we did this, it would just be sex, it wouldn't be ... love. That's not what I want. I want it to be love." He started almost weeping, <I want it to be with Lois.>

He attempted to give her satisfaction, however it was less than the satisfaction she desired.

They had cuddled some more and then moved to the living room and watched a movie.

Just over a week later on March 9th, Herb showed up with a request for assistance in the other universe. Herb assured him that he wouldn't be gone any time at all, so he didn't bother to call Mayson and cancel their date for that following Friday.

However, when they returned from that trip, Herb had offered to take him in search of his Lois. While he was packing for his trip to the Congo, he took a few minutes and flew to her office to see her and told her that he was going on a long trip.

Clark was rather nervous about this meeting. He was looking forward to being with his Lois, but what if things didn't work out? What if he couldn't keep her from dying? He liked Mayson, but if Lois returned with him, how would she take it? He thought that after what had happened on Friday that Mayson may not want to see him anymore and that would also be a disappointment, but it would make things easier if Lois did return with him. He'd just have to bite the bullet and tell her he was leaving and let the chips fall where they may.

Clark's nervousness was evident in his voice and his hesitancy when speaking. "Mayson, I don't know how to tell you this. I'm going on a, a mission of sorts. I'm leaving immediately. You won't have any way to contact me. I'll be sort of, well I guess, out of cell phone range would be the best description. I'm not sure how long I'll be gone. I may be gone only five minutes or five years, I don't know. What I need to say is, if you don't see me back here shortly, you may not see me at all. If I don't come back ... I just needed to tell you, you know, just in case, well, I've enjoyed the time we've had together."

"Clark, what kind of mission is this? It sounds like it's going to be very dangerous. How could you not come back? You can't be hurt! How could you not come back to me?"

"Mayson, remember I told you about how I've traveled in time and across dimensions, well I'm going to be doing more of

that. There is always the possibility of getting lost.”

Mayson reached for his hand and held it. “Then take me with you. Maybe I could help. I don’t want to lose you.”

“No, Mayson, that wouldn’t work. You have a life here. You have responsibilities, your job, your family. I, on the other hand have nothing to lose, except you. My life for a long time has been one of sacrifice. I had to sacrifice my engagement in order to help. Now, I find I have to sacrifice our relationship for the greater good. Mayson, I want you to know that I’ll always cherish the time we’ve had together, but we just couldn’t really go any farther in this relationship, and I think you know that. If Friday didn’t make that clear to you, I don’t know what would. I’m sorry that we couldn’t move to the next level, but it just wasn’t meant to be. Mayson, I have to be honest with you. The reason that we failed on Friday was nothing to do with you. It had everything to do with ... Lois.”

“But, she’s missing! You weren’t able to find her. How could she come between us?”

“Mayson, all I can say is that she did. The truth is that she is ***the*** woman that I am supposed to be with. I can’t get away from that fact. There really ***can*** be no other. I can wish it wasn’t that way all I want, but it won’t change the fact that she’s the one. This mission ... this mission is to travel back through time to find her. If I return at all, it will probably be with her. I’m sorry, Mayson, that’s the way it has to be.”

“Clark, I don’t want you to go away, but if I know anything about you, it’s that you are duty driven, and if you feel you must, then you must. I won’t lie to you, I ***was*** disappointed on Friday, but if this mission will help you move ahead, then go with my blessing. I want you to remember two things, first, if you don’t find her, I’m here for you, and second ...” Gulping she decided that the time had come. She had kept her feelings secret all this time, but she decided that she had to tell him just how she felt. Her voice lowered, and she said the rest somewhat shyly, “I think I’m in love with you.”

It was the first time either of them had expressed that to the other. Clark was shocked to hear it from her. “Mayson, I’m sorry, I can’t say the same to you. I don’t know what I feel. I know I like you, I like you a lot, but I don’t know about love. Maybe I’ll know better when I return.”

Mayson reached up and put her hand behind his head and pulled him down into a kiss. “Just remember what I said.”

“I will. Good bye ... Mayson.” He turned and left her office.
End Flashback

Chapter 7 — Spying on the Rebels

Clark had been spending some time reminiscing about the past, about his life as Superman, about Lana and Lois, and especially about Mayson. Now he started thinking about the present and about the twins. He really liked the girls. He always enjoyed his time with them. They were bright and pleasant company and full of life. Even with their attempts to tempt him into their beds, being with them brightened his days. It made him feel like a man again, and it was so unlike the time since the departure of Lois. He realized now just how depressed he had been since her departure. The stark contrast between his life now and what it had been for so long after Lois’ departure were very apparent. He knew that any kind of permanent relationship between him and the twins was not possible. But there was absolutely no reason to lead the life of a hermit, which was what he had almost become when Lois left and before Mayson. He was enjoying his life and looking forward to the day when it would be filled with his Lois and that day was approaching. In the mean time he would continue to enjoy his time with the twins.

There was another reason he was enjoying his association with the sisters. They didn’t know what he was. They had never heard of Superman so they were not pursuing him because he

was Superman. They were attracted to the man, Charlie King (Charlot to them. Charlot is the French for Charlie.), not the powers. They were so young and alive and ***French***. Thinking that he might as well make learning about Brazzaville and its environs a pleasant experience, he decided to enlist the aid of Suzanne and Colette. They were more than anxious to go with him anywhere he wanted to go. They always insisted on one at a time and always entertained the hope that they would wind up at one or the other’s apartment even though he didn’t encourage them in this. He tried to make it clear that all he wanted was companionship on these outings not a fling. However, the twins were not to be deterred.

It devolved to a test of will power. Was Charlie’s will power strong enough to resist the efforts of the twins and remain loyal to a woman he hadn’t even met yet, or would the twins be able to beat down his defenses and get him into their bed? He hoped his will power was strong enough to resist because he sincerely wanted Lois to be his first experience.

He learned what cafés were nice and which ones were not-so-nice. Which ones had a decent dance floor and which didn’t have any entertainment at all. Suzanne preferred the clubs with the dance floors, and she insisted that Charlie join her on the floor, especially for the slow numbers when she could get her hands on his body, and no one would think twice about it. She danced in a very sultry style, rubbing as much of her body against his as she could. It was almost like vertical sex with clothes on. Charlie was surprised that they didn’t become the center of attention with the way they were dancing until he remembered the French influence. This was the ***expected norm***.

After a night on the town when he would take the one he was with home, he would take her as far as her door. It was an expected thing that when saying goodnight that they would kiss. Each of the girls would do their best to use their kisses to entice him to enter the apartment. Suzanne was the more expert of the two. She would open her door and turn to him for her kiss. She would wrap her arms around his neck and give it all she had while she tried to move both of them through the door. She had Charlie so distracted that she almost succeeded a couple of times. Each time he would reaffirm that all he wanted was companionship.

Suzanne and Colette were not put off by this. Even though they were sisters, perhaps especially because they were twin sisters they went all out in their battle to be the first to succeed with Charlot. They just thought he was playing hard to get. That made him a challenge. Daily it was a contest as to who would have the sexiest appearance. Both eschewed the use of the bra, and the competition devolved to who had the shortest skirts and more revealing tops.

To be truthful, Charlie was enjoying the competition. After all he ***was*** a man and one that had never had women throwing themselves at his non-super self. Lana and Mayson had both been aware of his powers, so it couldn’t be stated that they were only interested in his non-super self. The same could not be said of the twins. They knew nothing about his powers. To them he was simply Charlot King, reporter.

Being a country boy from Smallville, his girlfriends had been few in number, especially since he had been in the foster care system. Eventually he had wound up in the Lang home for a period, and he and Lana were considered a ‘thing’ for quite a while. After he came of age and left the foster care system, they had continued to date. Admittedly when they first started to date, Lana did not know about his powers, but when he had opened up to her about them, she had insisted that he hide what he could do. She was afraid for him in that she didn’t want the government to grab him and study him. In vain Lana attempted to make him stop using his powers to help the police secretly, fearing that one day he would be seen and exposed, but he felt compelled to do

what he could to help. He was just careful that he wouldn't be seen.

It had seemed inevitable that he and Lana would be married, and they ***did*** become engaged. That all ended when he met Lois. He had never met her before, but somehow she knew all about him and what he could do. He had been blown away when she revealed her knowledge of him and had a hard time accepting her explanation that she and Herb were from another dimension. He didn't really come to accept her explanation as reality until she showed him the pictures in her wallet, pictures of herself and his doppelganger and especially a picture of him with his parents. That had really hit him. 'His' parents — alive. Then she had shown him a way that he could help openly. It was just a shame that it was all a set up by Tempus to use him as an enemy to focus the people on so that he could win an election. Actually after Tempus exposed him, he felt freer than he had felt all of his life, knowing that he didn't have to hide what he could do anymore. The only problem was that Lois had left. She had returned to her own Clark.

One morning he went in to the office to check on the cargo shipment again. When he got there, the only people present were Suzanne and Colette. Derek was out sick and Claude was in another city on an assignment. Charlie had been working on the computer a short while when the girls sprang their trap.

Colette and Suzanne had been waiting for just such a time as this. Suzanne had some time ago developed a little game. She called it 'Organe de presse' which loosely translated would be 'Pressy Bod'. Suzanne and Colette had been using this game to show difficult men just what they were missing. Colette had been looking forward to the time that she and Suzanne would play the game with Charlot, and now that time had come. Suzanne was going to do the honors after all it ***was*** her game, and besides she was the more expert. Colette had tried playing it several times and hadn't had quite the success that Suzanne seemed to enjoy ***every time*** she played it. Colette just didn't quite have the control of her body that Suzanne did.

So with a smile on her lips in anticipation of what was to happen, Colette got up and walked over behind Charlot and started massaging his neck and shoulders. For his part Charlie tensed up at the contact initially. The seeming innocence of the behavior belied his apprehensions though, and he began to relax sitting up and pushing back from the desk slightly. Colette was thinking, < Charlot is so like a wild stallion fighting the bridle and the saddle. Suzanne will break him to the bridle and her saddle. She will ride him. She will have him eating out of her ... whatever.> The thought of the whatever distracted her. She softened the massage so that it was more sensual and less therapeutic. The thought of what she could have him do with his tongue caused her knees to go weak.

This was what Suzanne had been waiting for. When Suzanne saw Charlot push back from the desk, she moved over and sat in his lap, facing him with her legs straddling his. In this position her skirt was up around her hips. She was wearing a lacy scrap of almost nothing which barely covered her nether regions. She leaned in for an open mouthed kiss.

Charlie thought, <Wow, these girls sure don't pull their punches. How can I curtail this without really hurting their feelings? Oh well, I might as well relax and enjoy it.> To think is to do, so Charlie gave himself over to the pleasure of the kiss.

After a while a somewhat breathless Suzanne pulled back and said, "Charlot, tu embrasses très bien! J'aime t'embrasser. Pourquoi est-ce que tu m'évite, mon chéri? Tu n'aimes pas me regarder? Tu ne me trouve pas attirante? Aimes-tu ce que je fais? Voudrais-tu que je continue, Charlot?"

(Tr: Charlie, you kiss very well! I like kissing you. Why are you avoiding me, my dear? Don't you like to look at me? Am I not attractive? Do you like what I'm doing? Do you wish me to

continue Charlie?")

She pulled on the neckline of her top and released her breasts from their confinement. She reached down and grasped Charlot's hands and placed one on each of her breasts.

Charlie thought back to his last date with Mayson and how it has ended so disastrously. He knew that he could handle this situation as long as he concentrated on Lois. He didn't want to outright reject Suzanne and hurt her feelings in that way, so he searched for a way to turn her down, gently.

Charlie finally came up with a plan. He decided to turn the tables on her. He broke the kiss and pushed her away somewhat.

She turned her head slightly and started kissing his neck and the side of his face. She said "Charlot, s'il te plait, fais l'amour avec moi ce soir. Si tu ne le fait pas, je vais mourir! Tu dois le faire. J'ai tellement envie de toi."

(Tr: "Charlie, please, you have to make love to me tonight. If you don't, I'll die. You must. I need you so much.")

Colette couldn't believe what she had seen and was hearing. Charlot had beaten Suzanne at her own game, and now she was literally begging him to make love to her. Now she was pleading with, no, she was begging him to take her home and make love to her. Not just trying to entice him for the fun, a sincere need. For this to happen to her sister was unthinkable. He was something really special. How could she resist him if her sister couldn't?

Charlie replied, "Suzanne, il n'y a aucun doute que vous êtes une très belle femme. J'ai apprécié notre baiser de tout à l'heure et j'aime vous regarder mais il y a quelqu'un d'autre."

(Tr: Suzanne, you are a very beautiful woman; there is no doubt of that. I enjoyed our kiss just now, and I do like to look at you, but there is someone else.)

Suzanne tried to persuade him, "Ah, c'est pour ça que tu as joué le difficile? Est-elle ici? Non? Et moi si! Ayons du plaisir ensemble. Charlot, couche avec moi ce soir. Elle ne le saura jamais."

(Tr: "Ah, so that's why you have been playing so hard to get? Is she here? No, I'm here! Let's have some fun together. Charlie, do you want to sleep with me tonight? She will never know.")

Charlie replied, "Mais, vous voyez, je le saurai. Elle a déjà mon coeur. Je ne peux le donner à aucune autre."

(Tr: "But you see, I would know. She already has my heart. I can give it to no other.")

Reluctantly Suzanne got off of his lap. She smoothed her skirt back down. She realized that neither she nor her sister were going to get anywhere with him, at least not right now. His heart was already taken. But she wasn't going to give up completely. Maybe she could wear him down yet. With that she and Colette both returned to their desks and went back to work.

Suzanne had given it her best shot, and Charlot had won the battle of wills and had remained loyal to Lois.

A week or so later he researched cargo movement within the country. He couldn't find anything on the internet, so he called the ministry of transportation. From them he learned that moving a shipment like they were expecting could take up to three months to go from the coast to the interior. Charlie found that the most likely course that the shipment would follow was by ship to Pointe Noire. It would then go by rail to Kinshasa. A ferry would bring it across the Congo River to Brazzaville so that it could be checked by L&M before it was shipped to the customer. From there it would be transshipped onto a river boat for transport upriver. The easiest place to locate the shipment when it arrived was the port at Pointe Noire. He needed to find out when it was expected. In order to get this information, he would need to spy in the rebel camp.

The next night Charlie dressed in the black outfit, packed his cammies in his black back pack, and flew out shortly before dawn. After he arrived at the foothills, he found a spot that would overlook the camp and spun into the cammies for the daytime

spying effort.

Clark had never been required to participate in the military, but as he had 'bounced around' in the foster care system after the deaths of his parents, he had wound up in homes of widely variant characters. In one of the homes he had stayed in, the father had been a Vietnam War vet and had a lot of military memorabilia and books. Clark had had an opportunity to read a lot of the books while he lived with them and had many talks with him about his experiences during the war and jungle warfare. Some of the books had described various battles and campaigns. Seeing this camp below him brought a lot of what he had read and heard to the forefront of his memory.

From his concealed spot in the foothills adjacent to the rebel camp, he observed their activities. He watched as they had rifle marksmanship training. He watched as they practiced moving techniques such as bounding overwatch. That was a technique where fire teams would 'leapfrog' forward. One team covered the other as they moved and then they traded responsibilities. This spoke of a sophisticated organization. He watched as they practiced with crew served weapons such as the Jeep mounted recoilless rifle. He watched them crawl under barbed wire while machine guns fired over their heads.

Charlie had noticed that there were some different uniforms mixed in among the trainers. Seeing this he looked more closely. There were Communist advisers acting as trainers to the rebels. Charlie had heard of the Communist sympathies of the rebels and this confirmed it.

He also watched the encampment itself. He saw that there was one tent near the middle of the compound that was somewhat larger than the others. The amount of traffic in and out would lead one to believe that it was a Command Post (CP). All through the day the sides would be rolled up for air. In the evenings the sides came down. Most evenings large groups of what were probably officers gathered there and stayed for long periods of time. Presumably they were having meetings, and these were what he was after. But he would need to get closer to be able to hear. Even he couldn't filter out all the ambient noise generated in a camp of this size to zero in on the meeting from this distance.

Monday February 3, 1992

After over a week of observation during which he was monitoring the guard strength and routine, he had a good idea as to how he could get in close enough to listen. <Time to get up close and personal,> he thought. He put his plan into effect the following night. He packed his camouflage fatigues and put on the black outfit while he flew to the vicinity of the camp. He checked on the positioning of the guards and selected a 'dead zone' in their coverage and descended. When he spun into the fatigues, he retained the ski mask, and then he flew at ground level to the vicinity of the CP tent. In the dark and in his camouflage fatigues, he was able to lay right next to the CP and blend in. By using his x-ray vision he could see what was happening and listen in with his superhearing.

They were speaking a Bantu dialect, but it was close enough to the Swahili that he knew that he understood at least most of what was being said. Most of the meeting dealt with incidentals, reports on training, ammunition expenditures, rations, numbers of recruits, etc. There was mention of an arms shipment due in soon, but no definite date mentioned. He decided that since the meetings were every other night he would need to be there to eavesdrop. <As it gets closer to the time of the shipments arrival, they will probably mention a firm date.> Another flight at ground level took him to the sentry 'dead zone' so that he could change back into the black outfit and fly out of the camp.

Monday February 17, 1992

It wasn't until two weeks later that he got a firm date on the

arrival of the arms. The ship would be docking in Pointe Noire on March 27th. It was time to get ready for Lois, and she was due in twenty three days. Things were progressing nicely.

Chapter 8 — Enter Lois Lane

Wednesday March 11, 1992

Lois had had to come in from England as there were only a few places that had flights into the Congo. When she had boarded the plane, she had planned for the change in climate. She knew that she would be moving from late winter or early spring in Metropolis to an equatorial climate. She was wearing a pair of off-white slacks with a matching jacket over a turquoise blouse. She could then remove the jacket and be comfortable in the equatorial climate of Brazzaville.

Charlie was there when Lois exited the plane and watched as she moved into the terminal to retrieve her luggage. He noticed that she was dressed well for the climate. <Her hair is somewhat longer than the other Lois'. She's wearing it in a shoulder length page boy type bob. I love it. I love her! I can't wait to meet her.>

When he saw that she had picked up her bags and that she really had more than she could handle by herself, he was elated. This was just what he needed. He watched her struggle with her luggage for a couple of minutes as she tried to move toward the taxi stand.

Lois was becoming increasingly frustrated. In Metropolis the Taxi drivers, in search of a larger tip, would offer to help with the luggage. At the airport there were carts if you wanted to rent them to wheel your luggage to check in. Those things didn't exist here. Brazzaville was a city of upwards of 500,000 residents, but from the air she could see that this city was nothing like Metropolis. When she was on the ground, she saw that she was not mistaken in her first impression. The conditions were definitely third world. This airport struck her as being little better than a small regional airport back home. When she deplaned, she descended a set of steps that were wheeled out to the plane! The cabbies couldn't have cared less if you had too much luggage. They didn't budge out from behind the wheel. She realized that she was on her own on this one.

When Clark thought that the time was right, he approached her and using a French accent offered to assist her with her bags. "Would zee Mademoiselle like zum 'elp?" he asked.

She thought about his offer, <Who does this guy think he is? Who does he think I am? Some helpless woman that *needs* a man to do things for her?> "I can handle them by myself, thank you!"

He backed off and allowed her to struggle with her luggage some more before he tried again to offer to help. "Please to allow me to 'elp?"

She realized that she really did need some help, so reluctantly she relented and allowed him to pick up her excess bags. He moved them to the taxi stand for her.

He casually asked her, "Does zee Mademoiselle 'ave a place to stay?" With her so near he almost lost focus and his French accent as he thought, <I want her near me, as near as I can get her. Just seeing her, I ache to be with her. Lois was right. What I feel being in my Lois' presence, it's stronger than what I felt for her. I just want to take her in my arms and never let her go. I want to kiss her senseless and carry her off. I need to be careful that I don't show too much, or I might scare her off. Keep it cool Kent.>

<A place to stay? Of course I have a place to stay. Why is he asking that?> She thought back to how she had made her arrangements for the trip. When Lois had gotten the tip about the guns, she had gone to Perry about it.

Flashback
Daily Planet

Pacing back and forth in front of the desk in Perry White's office with her arms crossed over her ample bosom Lois was trying to convince her editor. "Perry, this tip is the real McCoy. This gun running ring is real, and we can nail them. I just need to get to the Congo and get the goods on them."

Leaning back in his chair, Perry replied, "Look, Lois, you and I both know just how dangerous that could be. I admit you're my best reporter, but it's because of that that I don't want to lose you. Even if you weren't my best reporter, I care too much about you to see you walk into that kind of danger! Lois, you're like the daughter I never had. Please hear me out, I don't want you doin' this."

Planting her hands on the edge of his desk and leaning in to close the space and trying to be intimidating she replied, "But, Perry, this has Kerth award written all over it. I can almost taste it. I need to do this!"

Steeping his fingers Perry replied, "Lois, I can't sanction this trip. In my opinion it's far too dangerous."

Standing up and looking around and out into the bullpen through his window for inspiration, she saw John the photographer and said, "What if I take someone with me? I could take a photographer!"

Perry picked up a pencil from his desk and started tapping it to emphasize each point as he said, "The presence of a photographer will not lessen the danger any, in fact it multiplies it because there would now be two people in the same danger. Look, these are desperate people. They're in rebellion against their government. They wouldn't hesitate to kill you if you were caught. I don't want your blood on my hands. Please, I love you like a daughter, don't do this to me."

Starting to get desperate now, she continued, "Look, Perry, this story has my name on it. I've done dangerous investigations before. Look at the story I recently finished! I nailed that car heist ring. I went undercover on that and passed myself off as a male gang member. They didn't catch on, not in the slightest. If they had, I might have been shot, but that was a chance I was willing to take."

Not backing down on his position and trying to show her the fallacy of her argument Perry said, "Look, Lois, that was right here in Metropolis. This story is in the Congo for heaven's sake. You won't know your way around like you do here in Metropolis. At least on that carjacking story, you knew your way around if things got dicey. That wouldn't be the case in the Congo; too many things could happen."

Lois was really starting to get desperate now. Perry wasn't caving in to her wishes on this one the way he usually did. She tried another tactic. "Perry, I can take care of myself. You know that! I wouldn't have achieved my brown belt in Tae Kwon Do if I couldn't handle myself. I make it a habit to spar with the biggest and strongest men in my Tae Kwon Do class, and most of the time I win. Yes, I've managed to get myself into some tight spots in the past, but I've gotten myself out of them too. I can do this! I'm not going to just put myself out there. I'm going to hide in the background as much as I can. I really need to do this." Watching his face as she was citing this, she could see that this tactic was being ineffective. She tried to hit it from another angle. "Look at it this way, how would it look to be able to advertise 'Kerth Award winning reporter' as part of my byline. It would add a lot of prestige to the paper."

This seemed to hit home. He seemed to weaken, although just for a moment, before he came back with, "Yes, it would ***if*** you survived to receive the award. I can't risk that." He threw down his pencil and was very firm as he said, "The answer is still ***no***!"

Still unwilling to concede defeat Lois immediately decided what she would have to do. "Okay, have it your way. You don't

want me doing anything ***dangerous***. Okay then, since you don't want me doing this I'll just take a vacation."

Perry was taken aback by this totally atypical response. He blurted out, "That's awfully sudden, isn't it? One minute you're begging me to send you on assignment and the next you're taking off on a vacation. I smell a rat."

With something of a sneer, she replied, "I don't care what you smell, I have the time accumulated. I'm taking a vacation ... effective now."

Totally flabbergasted by this response Perry sputtered, "Now you wait just a doggone minute ..."

She spun on her heel and headed for the door interrupting him in a sarcastic tone, "I'll call and let you know when I'll be back from my 'vacation', that is ***if*** I decide ***to*** return. I just might have to find another paper that will back me up when I get a tip on a big story." This last sentence was spoken as she was standing in his door with her hand on the doorknob. With her last word she closed the door a little bit harder than was necessary.

After closing his door as she was rapidly walking away, she heard him shouting "Lois, come back here!"

She ignored him and stormed over to her desk, stuffed a few items into her bag, grabbed her coat, and almost ran up the ramp. Deciding to not wait for the elevator, she hit the door to the stairwell and was out of sight before Perry was able to get himself together and try to intercept her.

Lois didn't want to give Perry a chance to talk her out of it, so she went directly home, packed for an extended stay, got a plane ticket, made a hotel reservation at the first on the list, and headed out.

She had been saving for a new car since the one she had was a beat up wreck looking for a junk yard. She hoped that if she brought in the story that Perry would authorize a reimbursement, so she could still get her car. At least it was a favorable exchange rate. The rooms were pretty cheap.

On her way from Metropolis to London, Lois was starting to feel some regrets about how exactly she had handled it and decided that she really did need to let Perry know what was going on but not just yet. He might still try to talk her into coming home.

End flashback

Noticing that she was lost in thought, Charlie repeated his question, "Does zee Mademoiselle 'ave a place to stay?"

<A place to stay?> His question finally registered as Charlie was loading her luggage into the boot of the cab. Big city girl that she was, Lois eyed this ***helpful*** stranger with suspicion. "Why do you ask?" In her experience someone trying to help was someone trying to take advantage.

"So zat I can tell zee driver where to tak you."

She surprised herself when she quickly replied, "Oh, okay. Yes. I have a reservation at Bonne Nuit de Sommeil." <I shouldn't do this, but there is just something about this guy that makes me want to accept his help. But I wonder what he really has in mind.>

"Tres bien. Zee Mademoiselle 'as made an excellent choice. I 'ighly recommend zat 'otel. Eet leeves up to eets nam 'Zee Good Night's Rest'."

Clark tried to contain his excitement. <Excellent! She doesn't have a reservation somewhere else. Now I can get her close to me.> As she got in the back of the cab, he said to the driver, "Chauffeur, Bonne Nuit de Sommeil, sil vous plait."

The driver replied, "Oui."

Charlie entered the cab after giving these directions to the driver. Lois was already seated, and he sat next to her, <What does he think he's doing? I didn't invite him to go with me.>

He then said to the driver, "Aller, vite."

The driver replied, “Oui.” and stepped on the gas.

Charlie turned to Lois turned on that megawatt smile of his and said, “Enchanté. My nam ees Charles. Your nam ees?”

Lois, caught up in the effect of that smile, thought about this request. <I don’t know this guy from Adam, and he forces his way into the cab. But, wow, he has a **nice** smile, and he is kinda cute, and that French accent is adorable. He **is** being helpful, or does he have some ulterior motive? Is he interested in me?>

Lois regarded this stranger as she considered her options. <I don’t have time for this sort of thing, do I? I’m here for a story not a romantic involvement. Well, I **might** have the time for a **couple** of drinks as long as it won’t interfere with the story. Hmmm, do I want to give him my right name? I think I’ll use my old girlfriend’s name.> Lois replied, “My name is Linda King.”

Clark smiled even **more** brightly as if that were possible and replied, “C’est tres magnifique! My nam ees Charles **King**. **Tres** bon. Perhaps we are related, no?”

Lois replied, “Very interesting,” and relapsed into silence for the rest of the short trip. She was fascinated by the rundown conditions of the city that she could see from the cab window. She could see signs of ongoing repairs and other construction which apparently the city administration was pushing forward, but they had a long way to go to get up to Metropolis’ standards. After a very short time they arrived at the hotel.

Linda started to dig into her purse for some cash, but Charlie stopped her. “It weel be my pleasure to pay for zee ride. Charlie paid the driver and helped ‘Linda’ move her suitcases into the lobby.

“Permittee moi to get zee key for zee room pour vous, sil vous plait.” <Now to get her settled where I can keep an eye on her.> He then went over to the desk clerk and said in a low tone, “Une chambre à coucher pour la Mademoiselle au cinquième étage côté moi. Ajouter les frais de ma facture.” As he said this he slipped the clerk two 100 CFA Franc bills. (Tr: A bedroom for the young lady on the fifth floor next to me. Add the charges to my bill.)

The clerk nodded his head and slipped the bills into his pocket as he replied, “Dacord. Chambre à coucher, nombre 503.” He handed Charlie the key.

More loudly Charlie said, “Merci beaucoup!”

Charlie said to Linda, “Your room eez on zee feefth floor. We can take zee elevator.”

She thought, <How did he do that? The reservation is in the name of Lane, not King. What’s going on here?>

Shooing away the bell boy, he picked up Linda’s bags and headed for the elevator. When she was aboard, she pushed the button for five. When they stepped off on five, Charlie indicated that they move down the hall to the right just a few steps. He opened the door for her and took her bags in and placed them on the bed for unpacking and opened the windows to air out the room for her. He turned to her and said, “Eef you need anysang, anysang at all just come next door and knock. I am een 501.”

At this Lois got a knowing look on her face and thought, <I thought so. He must have bribed the clerk to give me this room. He **must** be interested. Do I have time for this? I do have a little over two weeks till the shipment arrives. Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained. I’ll just have to wait and see.> She said, “How nice,” and thought, <How convenient.>

Thursday March 12, 1992

Having no intention of sharing this story with anyone, Lois was going to avoid the Daily Planet office like the plague, especially since this was unofficial. Perry had not given her permission to follow up on this lead, but she felt she just had to. She could almost smell a Kerth award for this and wasn’t going to pass it up. <I’m doing this on my own. Sure it’s going to be

dangerous, but what investigation isn’t? That tip had the shipment coming in to Pointe Noire in about two weeks. That gives me some time to prowl around the city and see the sights.> It also gave her time to gear up for the upcoming activity.

Lois decided that she would do some sightseeing. When she dressed for the day, she donned a pair of nicely tailored light weight beige slacks with a white long sleeved fitted blouse, both of which accentuated her figure, and a floppy brimmed hat. She was not accustomed to the equatorial sun and thought it best to cover up since she planned to be out in it most of the day. Even so, she still applied sunscreen to her face and neck. As she left the elevator, she ran into Charlie in the lobby.

Charlie had been waiting for her to appear for half an hour. He greeted her cordially. “Bonjour mademoiselle. I trust zat you rested comfortably.” Meanwhile he was thinking <Wow! She’s a knock out! I don’t know if I’m going to be able to do this. If she didn’t dress so sexily, it might be easier. Nah, she would look sexy in a gunny sack. Keep it cool, Kent!>

“Why yes. Thank you for recommending this hotel. I was very comfortable.” <It was a random choice when I made the reservation, but his recommendation kept me here. This really was a good suggestion. I was very comfortable. I wonder if all of his suggestions will be as good.>

“Mademoiselle would like to see zee sights of zee city, would she not?” <Go slow. Don’t blow it, Kent.>

“Yes, I was planning on doing some sightseeing today.” <What is he getting at?>

“Would mademoiselle like zee guide? I am at your zervice.”

“Well, I usually like to just take things as they come up. I don’t usually hire guides.” <Ah, Ha. Here it comes. He’s after my cash. He wants me to hire him, probably at an exorbitant fee.>

“Ah mademoiselle, you meesunderstand, I am not o’fair’ing my zeervices for ‘ire. I am o’fair’ing zem for free. It would be my **pleasure** to escort you around our fair city.”

<Well, can you beat that. I guess I shouldn’t jump to conclusions.> “Well, in that case. I guess the price is right. OK Charlie, you’re on. Where do we go first?” <If he suggests his room I’m outta here.>

“I would recommend a tour of la Basilique Sainte-Anne of the Congo then la Palais du Peuple then a look at zee open air markets for zee souvenirs and treenkets. Zen lunch at Le Jardin or Etoiles de Jade. In the afternoon if you are eentereested a visit to zee Tennees Club. Zair clay courts are tres magnifique. Zis evening I would like to take you to Boom Boom Afrique.” <I **could** have her with me all day. If I play my cards right, I could have her with me every day.>

“Wow, that all sounds like fun!” She placed her arm through his offered arm and said, “Let’s go.” <Let’s see how this day turns out. If it’s as good as it sounds, maybe I’ll let him plan another day’s outings.>

Lois was amazed at the good time she had with Charlie. He was extremely pleasant, constantly concerned for her welfare, and an excellent conversationalist, and she simply adored his cute French accent. He was an all around nice guy and good companion. He also didn’t let her spend a cent on anything, paid for lunch and dinner as well as the souvenirs she wanted. <Wow, so far it has been a terrific day, and he’s been a perfect gentleman. This wasn’t such a bad idea after all. I’m glad I took him up on his offer. Definitely if he offers to plan tomorrow’s outing, I’m going to let him.>

After dinner he took her back to the hotel so that she could rest up and change before he took her to the Boom Boom Afrique.

Lois contemplated the limited number of dresses in her small closet. <What should I wear? I want to impress him, but I don’t want to be too over the top. Let’s see what I have.> She pulled out dress after dress holding it up in front of herself while she

checked her appearance in the mirror. Finally deciding on one she changed into a form fitting sleeveless red dress with a scoop neck and a hem that just brushed the tops of her knees and a slit up the left side to mid thigh. <I feel like a teenager getting ready for a date. It's been so long since I've dated ... I want to be attractive for him. I hope he likes what he sees.>

It was getting near the time that Charlie had said he would pick Linda up, so he quickly checked to make sure she was dressed. When Charlie saw her, all he could do was stare at her for several seconds. He shook himself to get it back together and headed for his closet. He had noted the color of her dress and quickly changed his tie. Exiting his room he went next door and knocked. He heard her as she approached her door, and to his surprise he heard her heart rate increase. Was she excited that she was going to see him? He hoped so. When she opened the door, she just stood there in the doorway. Charlie said "Ooo la la, vous êtes **très belle** ce soir, uh ... You are **zery beauty-ful** zis evening." <She looks incredible!!!! She is killing me! I can't stand it! How am I going to continue to do this?? I'm dying the death by a thousand cuts here. Keep it cool, Kent! I can get through this, I think.>

Linda replied, "Thank you," and blushed prettily. <I'm glad he likes what he sees. It's been a while since anyone has paid this kind of attention to me. It feels good.> Her heart rate was going a mile a minute. It was going so fast it almost made her light headed.

Chapter 9 — The First Date

Wednesday March 11, 1992

They arrived at Boom Boom Afrique at about 8:30.

The Boom Boom Afrique club, like almost all of the clubs in Brazzaville had a strongly French atmosphere with a slight tang of Dutch, courtesy of the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo from its early days as a Belgian colony. The music reflected this being a mix of African, American and French

Cue audio "Si tu veux de moi" (tr: "If You Want Me")(1)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKjTFBO4oY&feature=related>

As they entered the club they could hear the music being played over the sound system. The man at the door led the way as they wove their way in and out among the tables as he took them to a table off on one side. This wasn't a dinner club, so they ordered a couple of drinks, a Singapore Sling for Linda and Rum & Coke for Charlie.

While they waited for the drinks to be delivered, she looked around at the other patrons. This apparently was one of the upper tier clubs in Brazzaville. Most of the clientele appeared to be professional or semi-professional. Linda felt a little better about her choice of dress as it fit right in. She looked at Charlie with a critical eye. He was wearing a charcoal gray suit with a white shirt and a red tie. It had to be coincidence that his tie matched the color of her dress, but she liked the fact that it did. It reinforced the fact that they were together as a couple. She remarked on it, "I like your tie." She reached over and straightened the knot. With a teasing tone she asked, "How did you know I was going to wear red this evening? I didn't decide until the last minute."

Charlie replied, "Eet was yust a lucky guess." Changing the subject he asked, "as zee mademoiselle 'ad a good time wiss moi today?"

Cue second song "Qui Saura" (tr: "Who Will Know") (2)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUUUqQWCZ0c>

Their drinks were delivered, and Linda took a long slow sip considering her response before she finally answered, first asking a question. "Ummm, this is good. I've never had one of these before. What did you say the name of this drink is?"

"It's called a Singapore Sling.(3)"

"Well, we might not be in Singapore, but it still tastes good. To answer your question — yes, I have had a good time with you today. Actually I don't know when I've had a better time sightseeing." Listening to what was playing, with her lack of knowledge of the French language she didn't have the faintest idea as to what the artist was saying, but the beat communicated with a language all of its own. Linda started moving in her seat. She was tempted to get up and dance, but this was not a dance club.

"Eet maks me tres 'appy to 'ear you say zat. I wanted you to 'ave zee een-joy-able day. I wass 'oping zat eef you enjoy-ed today zat yust may-be you would conzider allow-ing moi to plan an outing pour domorrow."

"It was every bit of that. I've really had a good time with you." Reaching down she picked up her glass and took another long slow sip of her drink. When she sat it down, she started moving even more in her seat almost like she was actually on a dance floor. She closed her eyes and put her arms up in the air and started moving them back and forth along with her upper body in time with the beat. The drink was lowering her inhibitions slightly. She opened her eyes and gave Charlie a very appraising look. "What made you offer to take me out sightseeing today anyhow?"

"Oo would not lak to go zightzeeing wiss a zery beauty-ful wo-man?"

A little embarrassed by his statement and blushing somewhat, Linda sought refuge in taking another long slow sip of her drink. She knew that she had actually gone to some lengths to make sure that she was as attractive as she could be this evening, being very careful in the selection of the dress and the application of her make-up. By this time she was nearing the bottom of this particular glass. Charlie signaled the waiter to bring another of the same.

Linda continued her dance. She was becoming more fluid in her movements as the time went on. The drinks acting like a lubricant and giving her flexibility in her movements even confined to her chair which made her very enticing. Watching her Charlie was having a hard time restraining himself.

As their second round of drinks were delivered to their table, Linda immediately picked up her glass and took a deep drink. More than a sip yet less than a gulp.

She eyed him over the rim of her glass. She really liked what she saw. She had to admit that she really had had a good time with him.

Cue third song "Lady marmalade" (4)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=fvwp&NR=1&v=t4LWIP7SAjY>

She heard an old disco song come on. "Oh, I know this one!" She couldn't resist singing along with it. The reason it was being played was obvious. It was American, but it had a Creole French lyric. It was Lady Marmalade (1) by Patti LaBelle, and it went something like this:

*"Hey sister, go sister, soul sister, go sister
Hey sister, go sister, soul sister, go sister
He met Marmalade down in old New Orleans
Struttin' her stuff on the street
She said, "Hello, hey Joe
You wanna give it a go?"
Mm, Mm, Gitchi gitchi ya ya da da
Gitchi gitchi ya ya here
Mocha chocolata, ya ya
Creole Lady Marmalade
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?
He stayed in her boudoir while she freshened up
The boy drank all that magnolia-wine
On her black satin sheets where he started to freak*

Gitchi gitchi ya ya da da
Gitchi gitchi ya ya here
Mocha chocolata, ya ya
Creole Lady Marmalade
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?
 (Musical bridge)
Touching her skin, feeling silky smooth
Color of café au lait
Made the savage beast inside
Roaring until it cried, "More, more, more!"
Now he's at home doing 9 to 5
Living his brave life of lies
But when he turns off to sleep
All memories keep more, more, more
Gitchi gitchi ya ya da da da
Gitchi gitchi ya ya here
Mocha chocolata, ya ya
Creole Lady Marmalade
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?
Creole Lady Marmalade
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?
Gitchi gitchi ya ya da da
Gitchi gitchi ya ya here
Mocha chocolata, ya ya
Gitchi gitchi ya ya here"

When she finished, Charlie applauded as did a number of the other patrons. "C'est tres magnifique."

After the music stopped, she started to sing the chorus again. "Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?"

Before she got any further, Charlie quickly reached across the table and placed a hand on her wrist. This was the very first time his skin had touched hers. When it did, she felt a distinct tingling sensation where his fingers contacted her skin, and she stopped and looked down at his hand in wonder and then up at him. <Wow, what is that? Where he is touching me, it feels like I'm touching a live wire. What's causing it?>

Charlie felt it also. <I felt a similar sensation when I touched the other Lois, but this is stronger, much stronger. This has to be the soul mates connection she told me about. > He said, "Combien de Francais, uh, 'ow much of zee French language do you know?"

She answered distractedly, still wondering about this strange feeling she was getting from his touch. "Very little, why?"

He said, "I don't know zat I would be zinging zat a lot eef I were you. I might tak you up on your o'fair."

She said somewhat bewildered, "Offer, what offer?"

Charlie replied "Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir? To translate zat into zee Eenglish, it would be 'Do you want to sleep wiss me tonight?'" <Odd, just the other day Suzanne asked me that very same question. But of course, she *knew* what she was saying.>

Lois blushed dark red, almost the same color as her dress and choked out, "OhMyGod! Does it really mean that? Oh ... My ... God ... that **is** what it means!!!" <I can't believe I was singing that! Although, might that really be so *bad*, with him?>

Charlie said, "Mais oui. But of course. I reeal'ized zat you must not know, but I am steel tempted." <and how am I

tempted.>

Cue fourth song "Ou Es Tu" ("Or are You")(5)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ekk_rgCii84

As the next song started Charlie recognized the intro and knowing what song was coming, it really hit him. He started to get a look of longing on his face, and Linda asked. "Charlie, is there something about this song that is making you sad?"

"Zat ees right, you do no understand zee French. Ziss song, I weel translate eet for vous." After a phrase he repeated it in English.

"*Ce soir je pense à toi*
mon amour inconnu."

Tonight I think of you
 My unknown love

"*J'attends un signe de toi*
sur cette terre où es-tu."

I'm waiting for a sign from you
 On this Earth where are you?

"*J'attends je ne sais quoi*
d'infini, d'absolu
mon amour où es-tu."

I'm waiting for I don't know what
 Infinite, absolute

My love where are you?
 "Je vois la mer immense

le long des avenues."

See the vast sea
 Along the avenues.

"*Et des bateaux qui dansent*
Dans tous mes rêves où es-tu."

And boats dancing
 In all my dreams where are you?

"*J'attends dans le silence*
ce bonheur défendu,
mon amour où es-tu ?"

I wait in silence

For this forbidden happiness,
 My love where are you?

"*Où es-tu*"

Where are you?

"*au-delà de quel horizon*
 Farther than all horizon,
Qui es-tu, quel est ton nom

Who are you, what is your name?

"*Où te chercher je ne sais plus*
Parmi tous les hommes."

Where to find you, I no longer know
 Among all men.

"*Où es-tu*"

Where are you?

"*Mais où es-tu dans ce monde*
Sur une île que l'azur inonde
Au coeur de la nuit, où es-tu"

Where are you in this world
 On an island flooded by azure

In the deep of the night, where are you?

"*Ce soir je t'imagine*
Près de moi étendu"

Tonight, I imagine you
 Lying down next to me

"*Et puis je te devine presque à moi*
Mais où es-tu"

And I hope you're almost mine
 But where are you

"*Dans le palais d'un roi*
Ou au coin de ma rue
Mon amour où es-tu"

In a king's palace,
 Or at the corner of my street,
 My love where are you?
*"Je regarde une étoile
 qui annonce ta venue"*
 I look upon a star
 That announces your arrival
*"Mon ange, mon idéal
 Je tremble un peu où es-tu"*
 My angel, my ideal
 I tremble a bit where are you?
*"Dans une boule de cristal
 J'ai vu ton coeur à nu
 Mon amour où es-tu ... "*
 In a crystal ball
 I saw your naked heart
 My love where are you?
"Où es-tu"
 Where are you?
*"au-delà de quel horizon
 Farther than all horizon,
 Qui es-tu, quel est ton nom
 Who are you, what is your name?
 Où te chercher je ne sais plus
 Parmi tous les hommes."*
 Where to find you, I no longer know
 Among all men.
"Où es-tu"
 Where are you?
*"Mais où es-tu dans ce monde
 Sur une île que l'azur inonde
 Au coeur de la nuit, où es-tu"*
 Where are you in this world
 On an island flooded by azure
 In the deep of the night, where are you?
"Dis moi où es-tu"
 Tell me where are you?
"Parmi tous les hommes."
 Among all men.
"Où es-tu"
 Where are you?
*"Mais où es-tu dans ce monde
 Sur une île que l'azur inonde
 Au coeur de la nuit, où es-tu"*
 Where are you in this world
 On an island flooded by azure
 In the deep of the night, where are you?
"Dis moi où es-tu ... "
 Tell me where are you ...

After he finished, they both had very pensive expressions.

Charlie was in deep thought, thinking of how apropos this song was to his situation. He was thinking, <I've been looking and looking for her, and it took help from Herb to actually find her, and now I have the answer to the question of where she was. She's here with me now. Now it's up to me to see to it that I keep her near to me. I never want to lose her again now that I've found her.>

Linda was thinking, <Such a sad song and it has affected Charlie so. I wonder why. Actually, I can see why. I too can identify with it. I've been looking for one special man, but I'm afraid I'll never find him. 'Where are you?' Yes, I could ask that question myself. Where are you?>

After a minute or so Charlie spoke up, "Perhaps we should go now. Would you like to take zee walk along zee river bank?" <I need to get her out of here, somewhere quiet.>

"Sure." She picked up her glass and drained it. "That would be nice." <A walk along the beach. What does he have in mind?

Especially after that song.>

They walked and they talked. The drinks had affected her more than she would like to admit. Her conversation became very animated. She almost danced as they walked along, remembering that French song that she had chair-danced to back in the club.

Clark admired her doing bouncing dance steps and spins which showed off her very nicely shaped legs through the slit of her skirt. Eventually Charlie took her hand in his.

Every time his skin touched hers, she felt that tingling sensation. She had never in her life felt anything like it before. She continued her dance swinging their joined hands as she spun right and left with the swing of their arms in very uninhibited fashion. It was the perfect end to a nearly perfect day, a day that Lois would remember for a ***long*** time to come.

Chapter 10 — Starting the Investigation

Clark and Lois, both in their alter egos, spent the rest of the time together until the shipment was due. It was like one long wonderful date.

This was really unexpected. Although Linda had always thought of herself as an independent woman, somehow she was happy when Charlie offered to pay for her meals and souvenirs because it was stretching out her funds. When she had decided to follow up on this investigation, she had had to use savings. She hoped that if this investigation turned out and she brought in the story that Perry would authorize a reimbursement for her. Until then she was on her own hook for all of her expenses. She wasn't even thinking about the hotel bill. She usually paid something like that at check out, and she wasn't ready to do that just yet. She hoped that when she did they would take a credit card. That way the bill wouldn't come due until she was back, and hopefully the reimbursement would have been authorized by then.

They went out to see the sights and have meals together. They went shopping and sometimes went out just walking and talking. Lois hadn't really dated since college. She had decided that her career was going to take priority and that was it, but she was enjoying this and the time she was spending with Charlie. They were getting to know and like each other. The more time she spent with Charlie, the more time she ***wanted*** to spend with Charlie. The more they touched and she got that tingle, the more she enjoyed it. She was still curious about the source of this tingle and wondered why she only felt it with Charlie. In some way she knew that it contributed to some extent in her enjoyment of their time together. It felt like it was forming some kind of connection between them. She didn't have the words to express it, but it was there.

On the third day as Charlie was dropping her off at her room he somewhat shyly said, "We 'ave beeen zeeeee each o'zair now for a few days, and I would like to ask eef I could, eef I could geeve you a, good, a goodnight keess?"

"Charlie, I have never been one to kiss on the first date. I appreciate the fact that you waited. We've been together for three days now, and I've really been enjoying our time together. Yes, you may give me a goodnight kiss."

She tilted her head back slightly. He leaned in and placed one hand on her waist and the other hand behind her back and kissed her. At the instant of contact the tingle she felt when their skin came into contact manifested itself with a wham! Since the lips are more sensitive than hands, she could feel the tingle from this contact all the way to her toes. It was something more than a brotherly kiss but less than a seduction. Somewhat chaste but with lots of promise. Lois was very pleased with the outcome.

When he pulled away, she said goodnight and with a somewhat dreamy expression turned to enter her room. As she did so she suddenly stopped, whirled around, and throwing her arms around his neck gave him another kiss, this time it was her kiss that held the promise. She finally broke the kiss and

somewhat shyly because she was surprised at herself hastily said, “Goodnight Charlie,” and fled into her room.

As she closed the door, she relived those kisses. <Wow! That was a **nice** kiss, I mean, really nice. He didn’t try to push; he kept it simple. His hands didn’t roam all over me, and he was a gentleman the entire time. I really like that. It’s like he really cares about me and isn’t just after a fling. A girl could get used to that kind of treatment. I think I’d like a chance to anyhow. I can’t believe I kissed him back! I did enjoy it though. I can’t wait for tomorrow night!>

Charlie was frozen in place for several minutes staring at her closed door. His lips were still tingling! He couldn’t believe what had just happened. She had given him permission for a goodnight kiss, and he had been ecstatic. He had really enjoyed kissing her, and then all of a sudden she was back, and she was kissing him. Boy, what a kiss that was! He was stunned. He was happy! He hoped that she would do it again. He was looking forward to tomorrow night.

From that time on they did kiss regularly at the end of a date. As the time drew nearer for her to proceed with the investigation she found herself regretting that she would be leaving soon and thought to herself, <I **really** like Charlie. I’d like to give this relationship a chance. This isn’t going the way all my others have; it just feels right somehow. Once this investigation is done, I’ll have made a name for myself, and I could get a job on any paper I chose to, but do I want to leave the Planet? Well, the Planet has a local office, so if I really want to stay with Charlie I could transfer here, or maybe Charlie could come to Metropolis. After all it isn’t like he has a job here that he would have to give up. I guess I’ll have to wait and see how this investigation turns out.>

Friday March 27, 1992

Lois had been having such a wonderful time with Charlie that when the time arrived for the ship with the cargo to dock, she almost missed it.

At the last minute Lois called the concierge. “This is room 503. I’d like a car with a driver for a trip to Pointe Noir. ... Yes, today. ... I can be ready I about fifteen minutes. ... I’ll need an English speaking driver. ... Out front in twenty minutes? Okay.”

It was going to be a drive of about 6 hours. She felt bad about standing Charlie up since they had had plans for a picnic lunch at the picnic area of the Brazzaville Golf Club grounds, and she would miss that opportunity to be with him. She hoped that she could make it up to him in some way when she got back to Brazzaville. Knowing that she would probably be up most of the night, she intended to sleep most of the way.

That idea was put to rest as soon as they hit the outskirts of Brazzaville and encountered a well rutted dirt road. She had wondered why the concierge had arranged for a four-wheel drive vehicle, a Land Rover no less! About an hour out they were stopped by armed gun men. The driver dickered with them for a while before passing over some bills, and then they were allowed to go on.

“What was that all about?” Lois had asked for an English speaking driver when she had talked to the concierge, and he was just barely. He shrugged and said over his shoulder, “They wan’ the jus.”

“Jus, what jus?”

“Mooney for zee use of zee road tru’ zair area. Zay control eet and promise zat we weel not be robbed while we are on eet.”

“We won’t be robbed while we are on it, but we are robbed to use it?” Lois asked disbelievingly. Under her breath she muttered, “This sure isn’t the states.”

The driver gave her a semi-toothless grin in the mirror. “Zis ees what zare is.”

Lois had honed her taxi driver debate skills on the stark battlefield of Metropolis, but this was something else! Sighing deeply she flopped back in her seat and tried to sleep, the seat belt fastened tightly around her, ruefully reflecting that she had asked the concierge earlier about taking the train from Brazzaville to Pointe Noire, and he had discouraged her, saying it was very dangerous and robberies and stops were frequent. Besides it could take three days to get there, and she didn’t have that amount of time

When she was not asleep or bouncing sharply, she did a lot of thinking. She thought about how she had walked out on Perry when she decided that no one was going to stop her from doing this investigation. She was really starting to feel bad about it and had just about determined that she was going to contact him and at least let him know that she was okay. At least now it would be too late for him to talk her out of doing this.

She also thought about Charlie. She thought a **lot** about Charlie. She thought back to the third day that they had been together. That had been their first trip to the Golf Club grounds for a picnic lunch. Charlie had suggested it, and she hadn’t been too enthusiastic about it.

Flashback

First Picnic, Third day

Charlie said, “I pro-mise zat you weel ‘ave a good time. Zee food from zee ‘otel dining room ees excellent, and zee zeenery ‘as to be zeen to be believ-ed.”

Linda replied, “You don’t understand, I don’t do picnics. You want to know what a picnic is to me? I’ll tell you what a picnic is, it’s getting a hot dog with the works and a soda from Mike’s Dog Waggin’ and sitting on a bench in Centennial Park in the sun to eat it. That’s my idea of a picnic.”

“Ah, I zee, but I t’ink I can shan-ge you mind. Please to allow me to try. Eef you do not en-joy eet, I weel no suggest eet a-gain. But eef you do, zen per’aps we weel do eet a-gain. Weel you at least geeve eet a try?”

“I guess one time won’t hurt. Okay, but don’t get your hopes up.”

“Zery well, I ‘ave order-ed zee peekneek lunch from zee ‘otel dining room already. Let us go and peek eet up, and zen we can ‘ead out to zee Golf Club grounds.”

They went to the Golf Club grounds and found a shady spot under a tree and spread out the blanket. Lois was pleasantly surprised; the grandeur of the view was breathtaking. They were beside the river and were at a place where they overlooked the rapids. The sight and sound of the rushing tumbling water was awe inspiring. For a time she simply stood and watched the play of the water in the rapids. The water turning white and foaming as it swept over the rocks. It was almost mesmerizing.

After Charlie had everything out, he came over and stood behind her, not saying anything just enjoying being close to her, his Lois, and enjoying her reaction to the scenery and the rapids.

He was standing close enough that Linda could feel his breath on the back of her neck but was so thoroughly mesmerized by the play of the water as it tumbled over the rocks that she didn’t turn from the view, waiting to see what he would do.

Softly he said, “Eet ees beauty-ful, ees eet not?” Slowly, oh so slowly, he put his hands gently on her waist.

His breath continued to tickle her bare neck, and Linda replied in a somewhat distracted tone, “Yes, yes it is. So much power. The force of the water moving that way. It’s awe inspiring. I could just stand here and watch it all day.” As she was speaking, he slid his hands around so that she was within the circle of his arms.

Charlie hoped that the distraction wasn’t just because of the falls. He dared to pull her gently back against his chest and

whispered in her ear, “Ah, but eef you deed zat, zen we would not ‘ave zee lunch!”

The contrast of the mundane words and his actions shot heat through her body. She slowly turned within his arms and nodded her head. Noting his intense gaze she smiled. He opened his arms, and she started to move over to where the blanket was spread out but looked back over her shoulder a couple of times as if reluctant to lose the view.

<Was the view of him or of the water? Or perhaps both,> Clark wondered.

Reaching the blanket she sat down on one side, and he sat down on the other with the picnic basket in between. The noise if the rapids still pervaded the atmosphere as a background to their talk. As if by mutual agreement, their talk reverted to impersonal topics.

Linda casually remarked, “I seem attracted to things of power like those rapids.” Then she looked over at Charlie and was startled by the penetrating look he gave her as if trying to see into her soul. Shaking the strange feeling off, she openly admired the lovely layout of food that the hotel had provided.

They chatted and munched on boneless chicken breast and cut up vegetables with a bottle of wine. As they had consumed the wine, Linda had started to relax. Her negative attitude toward the activity had been mollified by the view of the rapids which she had been so taken with. She had to admit to herself that she was having a pleasant time. The scenery was spectacular, both the river and her companion, and she had enjoyed the conversation and relaxation. A thermos of coffee and a container of melon balls with toothpicks as skewers were there for desert. When they were finished and had cleaned up, she said to Charlie, “I must admit that I’ve had a good time. Charlie, you’ve changed my mind about picnics. Let’s do this again.”

“I knew zat eef you would just give eet a shance, you would eenjoy eet. We weel do eet a-gain een a few days depending on zee wezer. We don’t want to picnic in zee rain.”

That night they had gone to a dance club. Lois was amazed at what an excellent dancer Charlie was.

When she had asked him about it, he had said, “Een my travels I ‘ave bean all around zee world. One of zee places I have bean was Nigeria. Of course Nigeria is a neighboring country, so zat was not such a long treeep. While zere I was engage-ed as a tutor to a young prin-cess. She was about twelve years of age. We got along fameously, and she o’faired to teach me to dance. Zat ees where I learn-ed zee ballroom dance.”

While they were dancing though, he seemed so stiff and formal. It wasn’t too bad for the more formal waltz, but when a slow number had started, Lois had taken her hand out of his hand and guided his hand to her waist and then placed her hand on his shoulder. He had acted like a scared rabbit and had still kept her at something like arm’s length for much of the number. Finally he had started to relax and pulled her in somewhat closer. She couldn’t understand what had happened to make him so ‘gun shy’ about holding her close on the dance floor. She still remembered the feel of his breath in her neck.

From that point on they had had a good time. It was when he had taken her back to her room that night that he had asked permission to give her a goodnight kiss. Lois had been surprised that he had waited that long but was happy that he had and also had been pleased at the nature of the kiss.

They had returned to Golf Club grounds several times since, and as their relationship had grown, the nature of the outings had changed. It had actually become one of her favorite places. She remembered the last time they had gone.

Last picnic, two days ago

They had spread the blanket under ‘their’ tree. Charlie had been casually leaning back against the tree trunk. His left leg was bent, and his left foot placed next to his right knee. His left arm was extended, and his hand was on his left knee.

<Mmmm, he looks delicious relaxing there like that. I want to get close to him, how do I do it?> Inspiration struck. <I know!>

Linda had decided that this looked like a comfortable chair, so she reclined back against his chest and arm, practically sitting in his lap to do so. Then she opened the basket and begun tearing off strips of chicken and feeding them to Charlie and herself. As they talked, she could feel the deep rumble of his voice echoing in his chest. When he wasn’t talking, she thought she could feel his heart beating as she asked, “Remember our first picnic?”

“Ow could I for-get? You deed not want to come.”

“Yeah, I guess I’ve been too much of a city girl. You’ve managed to chip off some of my sharp edges. I feel so much more relaxed when I’m with you than I have felt with anyone else. Why is that do you think?”

“Per’aps eet ees because I am a person oo likes to tak t’ings easy. Per’aps because I like you and you, maybe, you are beginning to like moi? Could zat be possible?”

She thought for a few seconds before answering, “Yes, that is possible. That is ***very*** possible.”

When she was feeding him some of the cut vegetables some of the dip dripped onto his chin.

Charlie started to reach up with a napkin to wipe it off, but she stopped him.

“No, that was my fault. I’ll take care of it.”

She turned around and licked it off. When she did this she did it very slowly and sensually. Then her lips found his, and they were involved in a very long, nice, satisfying kiss. While the kiss was deepening, a soft moan of pleasure started emanating from the back of her throat. When the kiss ended, she said, “Mmmm, that was nice. I enjoyed that.”

He replied with feeling, “Zo did I.”

When it was time for desert, Lois found a container of seedless grapes. When she started feeding these to Charlie, she used her index finger to poke the grape into his mouth. He pursed his lips and she pushed the grape in. After a few of these, he opened his lips unexpectedly, and the grape and her finger both went into his mouth. He clamped his lips down on her finger and sucked on it and licked it with his tongue. At first she had a startled expression on her face but then desire took over.

She let out an, “Oooooo,” sound and her eyes started to cloud over with desire. This act sent goose bumps up and down her spine and little shivers all the way to her toes and a very warm feeling into her loins. After he released her finger, she brought her hand up to caress the side of his face as she looked into his eyes. He in turn brought his free hand up and caressed the side of her face. They had simply sat there for several minutes communicating without words what each was feeling.

Linda finally broke the silence, “Charlie, I don’t know how, but you do something to me that no one else has ever done before. I really like you, Charlie. I like the time we’re together, and I find that I’m missing you when we’re apart.”

“I find myself count-ing zee ‘ours unteel we are toge-zair again.”

They had lapsed into silence; both of them mulling over these revelations. Eventually they had finished the picnic and returned the basket to the hotel. They had finished the day with more sightseeing and dinner followed by dancing.

End Flashback

Lois was wrestling with her conscience as she tried to rest on the long drive. <I was really looking forward to today’s outing,

but the ship is due and I have to be there. I really should have been up front with Charlie and told him that I had another commitment, but how would I have explained it? He doesn't know that I'm over here on a job. It has never come up in our conversations. He appears to be some kind of playboy; at least he appeared to be very wealthy. He doesn't have any kind of job that he has to go to, and I guess he simply thinks that I'm here on some kind of vacation what with the amount of time we're spending together.>

When she had called the concierge that morning to arrange a car immediately for a trip to Pointe Noir, she hated to do it, realizing it would hurt Charlie's feelings to be stood up like that with no warning from her. Suddenly she sat up in alarm as she realized he might think she had gone missing or been kidnapped. She knew he knew nothing about her investigation or that she was a reporter at all.

She liked Charlie a lot, but ***this*** was ***her*** investigation. To her, in some respects, this was her reason for living. <I hope I can make it up to Charlie. I hope I haven't damaged the relationship that has been developing, but this is more important.>

Finally, oh finally, after three more stops to pay 'jus' on the National Road, they arrived in Pointe Noir. As they reached a miraculously paved road, she was able to roll down her window, which had been up against the dust, and inhale the air. It was hot and humid, but it smelled wonderfully of the sea.

"Where to here, mam'sell?"

Having studied her map of Pointe Noire, in French of course, she said, "Drop me at the Gare de Pointe Noire."

The driver looked at her in the mirror and raised an eyebrow, "You go to train station? Mebbe you should take train back."

Giving her best gimlet eye look back in the mirror, she replied, "Maybe I will. Or fly."

The driver shrugged. This seemed to be a universal signal in taxi driver land. "See if I care."

"How much do I owe you?"

The driver smiled again. "Two t'ousan' franc'. I pay jus'."

Being prepared, Lois handed him twenty 100 CF notes and got out of the car with her back pack when he pulled up to the train station. It was about \$220, or slightly over \$15 an hour plus tolls. It was expensive but still less than buying a car for the drive. She had a sudden thought, <Charlie has a Land Rover. I wonder if he might have considered driving me if I had asked sweetly. Oh well, it's too late now. I'm here. I wonder if he'd be willing to pick me up. Nah, not after standing him up this way. But he might be relieved enough that I wasn't kidnapped that he'd do it. I'll think about it later.>

After the car dropped her off, she used a ladies room to change into dark clothes and walked two minutes along Avenue Marien Ngouabi to the port. As she walked, she took time to watch the sun sink into the ocean.

Linda's informant had told her the name of the ship the cargo would be on, and by checking the newspaper she knew at what pier it would be docked and the time of arrival. Too bad he hadn't included any details about the road between Brazzaville and Pointe Noire, but then he wasn't from the Congo, he was from Metropolis.

The ship had docked at 7:30 PM, and it was now 8:30 PM. She didn't know just how soon they would unload, but she was hoping that this wouldn't be a long stakeout. In her back pack she had some snacks and bottled water, but before this was over, she thought she might be in need of a cup of coffee. <That's one of the drawbacks to working alone all of the time. You have to get your own coffee. Sometimes I almost think that it would be good to have a partner. At least they could go for the coffee. I would just need to find one that wasn't an incompetent. Someone I could train, two artificial sweeteners and non-dairy creamer.

Someone I could trust to not stab me in the back and steal a story.>

Charlie had heard when she called the concierge to arrange for a car to pick her up. While she was packing her back pack, he had quickly done the same thing and ducked out to get his car and watch for her in front of the hotel. When he saw her enter the car, he started following. With his enhanced vision he was able to follow at a greater distance than someone following normally would. That kept her driver from knowing that they were being followed all the way to Pointe Noir. Surprised when he hit the unpaved highway, he determinedly followed Lois. There were times he was tempted to just pick up his Land Rover and fly ahead of her. He too paid the 'jus'.

Charlie kept an eye or more accurately an ear on Lois when they reached the dock area. He made sure that once there, he was in front of her at all times. It was now extremely dark in this part of the port; most of the light in the immediate area was being supplied by the lights of the ship. Once he found a concealed position where he could observe the transshipment of the crates to the dock, he hid himself. With his superhearing he knew that she was right behind him and was sneaking up toward his position. <There she is. I'd better let her know I'm here.>

Just as she was about to move up basically right next to him, he made a slight noise to alert her to the fact that there was someone else there and then moved slightly so that she would see the motion and know exactly where he was. He was tracking her position by listening to her heartbeat, and it was somewhat accelerated in excitement. When he made the noise and shifted his position so that she would spot him, he heard her gasp and again her heart rate kicked up even higher.

The port officials came down the gangway at about 10:30 PM after giving the ship its clearance. They had to wait until about 11:30 PM before the crates started being moved to the dock. It stood to reason that they wouldn't wait for daylight. It always seemed that nefarious activities were conducted in the dark.

Clark thought, <This could be my only opportunity to team up with her. I can't afford to let her leave Pointe Noir without me. I can't be sure that I'll ever see her again. She did stand me up for our planned outing today. Yeah, I knew that the ship was due, but I made the plans with her anyway. I wanted to see how she would handle it. I wasn't too pleased with the fact that she made the commitment and then snuck out on me. She should have been up front and told me that she had another commitment.>

So, here they were. He could have confronted her very easily, but instead of that he wanted her to take the initiative. He wanted her to 'catch' him but was still unsure how to go about it. While mulling this over he continued to watch as the crates were unloaded and stacked on the dock and pretended not to know that she was there.

When all of the crates had been off loaded, trucks came in and a crew of longshoremen loaded the crates onto them. When the trucks moved out, they did so at a walking pace which Charlie was able to keep up with easily even with the need to remain concealed. He tracked Lois as she followed both him and the trucks. She was keeping both of them in sight. The trucks only moved a short distance to the warehouse area adjacent to the docks. Charlie noted that the warehouse in question was one of the ones he had identified as belonging to L&M Enterprises. There was a crew there to unload the trucks. When all of the crates had been moved into the warehouse, the crew was paid off and dismissed. The boss closed up, locked the warehouse, and left.

Lois had been watching this interloper's actions this whole time. In the dark she couldn't tell who it was. The dark clothes and the dark knit hat effectively disguised him. Of course the same could probably be said of her. She decided that it was time

was never filed, but I have to act like it's the most important thing I have to do and do it right.>

Charlie led the way back the way they had come to the dock.

She asked, "Why are we ***here***? I thought we ***had*** what we needed." <What is he up to?>

He replied, "I need to get a copy of the bill of lading. That's what we need to track the shipment back to its point of origin."

Lois asked, "And just ***how*** are we supposed to do that? I was planning to raid the Metropolis office of the shipping line to get that when I got back." <Where is he going with this?>

Charlie said matter-of-factly, "This'll be easier; it should be in the purser's office."

Lois replied sarcastically, "Easier? Really? How do you propose we get in there, assuming we even know where that is so that we can get a look at it? Just walk up and ask pretty please? Trust me, my way will probably be easier." <What could he be thinking?>

Charlie replied, "No, I don't think so. I'm going to sneak aboard, and since I'm familiar with this particular type of ship, and its compartment layout I should be able to find it with little difficulty. I'll use the camera to film that document as well so that we have both the Manifest and the Bill of Lading." <I can get in find the purser's office and be out in a short time and avoid the watch easily.>

<Now, he's talking ***my*** language! I want to go too!> Linda replied emphatically, "Okay, you may be right but not without me you don't. This is still my investigation. I'm going with you."

From his association with the other Lois, he knew a losing battle when he saw one. <I could argue with her on this till the cows come home and not change her mind. I guess that discretion being the better part of valor I need to give in.> "Okay, but stay close to me. They'll have a watch on the gangway, so we'll have to climb the bow hawser." Suiting his actions to his words, he moved to the bow and indicated a line that was about eight inches in diameter. "You go first and that way if you have a problem, I can help you out." <This is going to slow me up, but oh well, at least she's with me, and this way I can protect her.>

They started to climb the hawser which sloped up at about a sixty degree angle. Lois basically sat astride of it and pulled herself up. She would lean forward and grasp the line and pull herself up, and then she would lock her legs around the line and repeat the process until she reached the upper deck. She thought, <I'm glad I stay in shape with Tae Kwon Do and the Stairmaster. It really is paying off.> She was very pleased with her performance.

She was joined on deck a few seconds later by Charlie. When they arrived on deck, they were in a sheltered area of the forecabin, and in the dark it was unlikely that they would be seen. By the time she had completed the climb, she needed a minute or two to recover from the exertion. Charlie was surprised and pleased that she had not had any serious difficulty with the climb. He said, "I'm impressed. There aren't too many women that could perform that feat as easily as you just did. You really stay in shape." He completed silently, <In more ways than one. She is going to be a partner worthy of a superman.> "How do you do it?"

"Tae Kwon Do, I have my brown belt. I'm going to want you to teach me that move you used on me. Where'd you learn it?"

"Oh, I've picked up a few moves here and there."

After a couple of minutes, she had recovered, and they moved aft. With his superhearing Charlie heard a crewman heading in their direction. Before he came within sight, Charlie grabbed Linda and pulled her into a companionway to avoid being seen by him. This took Linda by surprise and not knowing the reason her temper flared at being man-handled that way. She knew that she was in 'enemy' territory and that she needed to be quiet, but that didn't keep her from hissing at him, "What do you

think you're doing?" He clamped a hand over her mouth which aggravated her even more.

She was so mad she almost didn't hear him whisper, "Shhhh. Pipe down, roving guard." After she heard the crewman pass, she settled down once more and whispered, "Sorry. Try to warn me next time."

Charlie replied, "I'll try to but no promises," and then he led them to a hatch a little farther aft which he closed after they had passed through. He was surprised by the fact that he couldn't use his X-ray vision while he was looking for the purser's office. He hadn't considered the fact that they probably used lead based paint. As a result he was going to have to check every hatch and see if he could spot something that would tell him where the purser's office was. He got very lucky in that he spotted a sign over the door down the companionway from the hatch they had entered. It read "Purser". Clark heaved a silent sigh of relief.

Fortunately all of the crew except for the watch was in their bunks, so they were undisturbed as they opened the purser's office. Once again Lois demonstrated her ability to pick locks. This one took less time than the lock on the door of the warehouse, so they soon opened the door and looked for the bill of lading for the shipment consigned by L&M. Lois located it in an inbox waiting to be filed. Charlie took a picture of the bill of lading; they put it back and left.

They retraced their steps back to the bow and started down the hawser.

This time Charlie went first, and it was a good thing he did. About half way down Lois lost her grip with her legs and slipped, the rope sliding through her hands giving her a rope burn. She let out a muffled scream of pain and let go with her hands. As she was starting to fall Charlie saw what was happening and flew back up the rope, making it look like he was climbing and grabbed her arm just as she was about to drop into the harbor water. <Got you! I'm not going to let you fall, not if ***my*** life depended on it!> In his anxiety he wasn't quite as careful as he should have been and used some of his superstrength to lift her up onto the line. He pulled her to him and just held her for a minute.

He said, "Don't worry, I'll get us down. Just relax." <Whew, got her just in time. I need to be more careful though. What if she noticed the superstrength?>

Breathlessly she replied, "OK, thanks." <Wow, that was close. He saved me a dunking. If I had gone into the water, it probably would have given us away. But oh, my hands hurt.>

As they descended the rope Charlie kept his hand on her pert bottom supporting her and preventing her from sliding uncontrollably down the rope. When they were on the dock, he hustled them into the shadows. He put his arms around her and simply held her for a minute. He said, "I'm sorry. I should've been more careful. Here, let me see your hands." He looked at her hands and saw that they were reddened from the abrasion, but the skin was not broken. Hoping that she was still somewhat distracted by the incident he used just a little of his supercold breath, using just enough to take the sting out but not enough to chill her hands. It would have felt like water evaporating from her skin. <I hope she doesn't notice. There, that should help her hands and keep them from blistering. I just want to hold her and comfort her.>

She replied, "Nothing to be sorry about. You saved me, didn't you? Thanks. Boy, you're sure stronger than you look." <Yeah, he must really work out to be that strong.>

<Uh, oh, she noticed.> He replied somewhat lamely, "It must have been a surge of adrenalin."

Charlie asked Linda where she had stashed her bag. She led him to it, and he picked it up and carried it for her. They made their way out of the dock area and to his Land Rover.

Charlie knew she didn't have her own transportation because

he had followed her car to the Gare du Pointe Noire and saw her dropped off. From there he had paced her walk to the dock area. He had parked his car and then moved ahead to the port facilities owned by L&M and followed her progress as she followed along behind.

Shortly after leaving the immediate area of the docks Linda recognized his Land Rover parked on a side street.

Carefully Charlie got Lois into the front seat and threw her bag in back with his. He climbed into the driver's seat and drove up the Avenue de Loango, looking for a decent enough hotel/motel. The Atlantic View seemed clean and nice on the outside. Besides it was about four hundred and twenty kilometers to Brazzaville, and he didn't plan to drive back tonight. At least not on ***that*** road. Idly he wondered if they still charged for 'jus' at night. No matter, even he wouldn't drive that road at night.

Worrying about what the final outcome of this would be, he rented a single room. Still worrying about her because she still appeared to be suffering from the incident at the docks, he held her arm and placed his other arm behind her back as he assisted her up to the room. His mind and emotions were in turmoil as he thought, <How is she going to take this? I just want her near me. I could have gotten two rooms, maybe I ***should*** have gotten two rooms. Oh well, at least there should be two beds.> Charlie relaxed a little as he opened the door and found that there were indeed two beds in a clean and attractive room.

As soon as the door was closed, Linda whirled on him and let him have it. She poked her finger in his chest with each question. "Okay, just ***who*** are you, anyway?" [poke] with this he retreated slightly. She pursued him keeping him in range. "Who are you ***working*** for?" [poke] Another step back. She followed, keeping him in range. "What are you doing ***following*** me?" [poke] This time when he stepped back he came up against the door. Seeing that her quarry was cornered, she continued her pursuit. He brought up his hands in a defensive gesture. "***Why*** were you on that dock when I got there?" [poke, poke] "***Why*** did you follow that shipment?" [poke, poke, poke] Now the coup de grace, "What happened to your ***French accent***?" One final [poke]

With what he hoped was a relaxed chuckle he replied, "My name is Charlie King, for now. I'm a stringer for the Daily Planet. I wasn't following you; I was in front of you. I'm tracing illegal weapons sales. No, I'm not really French, that was an act so that I could get close to you."

"You're a WHAT?? For WHO??"

"As I said, I'm a stringer for the Daily Planet. I got a lead on a shipment of illegal guns coming in for the rebels and was checking it out." <She seems to be buying the story. I need to tell her enough that she will allow me to stay with her.>

She sputtered, "But, but, that's ***my*** investigation! How did you find out about it?" <Yeah, how? How did he find out about the shipment? My source wouldn't have let anyone else know. He had to have had another source of information. I need to find out more about you.> In an attempt to intimidate him, Linda gave him her patented gimlet eyed stare that unflinchingly caused competitors to quail.

Charlie didn't quail and that surprised her. He mockingly replied, "A little bird told me about it. Come on, you don't really expect me to reveal my sources, do you?" <I can't tell her that I know about it because I know what she was doing when we lost her five years ago.>

<Let's see how persistent he is.> "Well ... no ... I guess not, but this is still ***my*** investigation. ***Butt out*!**"

"Whoa, hold on there, who are you to be telling me to butt out? This is as much ***my*** investigation as it's ***yours***. <I can't let her force me out. I need to convince her to let me go along.>

She got a shrewd look on her face and said, "Let me see your

ID." <This should tell me something.>

He pulled his ID out of his wallet and showed it to her. <I hope this convinces her.>

She took it in hand to look at it, and as soon as she saw it, she knew it was a fake. The perusal however gave her some time to think. <What does he mean 'Charlie King ***for now***? It must mean that he is undercover. Just who is he really working for? A stringer for the Planet, that's just another word for freelancer. Give me a break. I know most of the freelancers that submit to the Planet, and he's not one of them. Besides this ID is a phony. I wonder who he's really working for. He could be working for the gun runners for all I know, or he could be government. How would the gun runners know I was on their trail? Impossible! He has to be government, a secret agent maybe, NIA, ATF, or FBI or some other acronym. I wonder which one? That would explain how he knows so much. But why would he be so interested in me? Is that part personal or part of the job? That could explain our meeting at the airport. That meeting was so contrived, it had to be phony. That could explain how he knew I was on my way. Is my investigation that important? I hope I'm right, and he's government. He said he put on the French act so that he could meet me. It must be personal. How could it be anything else? The time we've shared, the things we've done together. I'm just a reporter, not an international spy. He wouldn't wine and dine me this way unless I had some big secrets to disclose, would he? I hope it wasn't for the job!>

As she handed the ID back she said "Okay, so where do we go from here?"

<Whew, looks like she bought it.> Charlie suggested, "Well, actually I think that this story is big enough for both of us. Why don't we partner up?" <I need to be careful with this. She has never worked with a partner. She doesn't like working with anyone else; she has always been a solo act. Still I need to convince her that she needs me along.>

She gave him an appraising look which bought her some time to think <Why does he want to partner up with me. Is he really working for them? Is he just trying to keep tabs on ***me***? Well forewarned is forearmed. Who is watching the watcher?> before she retorted vehemently, "I don't ***do*** partners. I can't ***work*** with one. They just ***get in the way***."

Charlie replied placatingly, "How about this, I have some information that you may be interested in. Do you know who is supplying the weapons?" <I need to hook her.>

Lois warily replied, "They are being shipped from Metropolis."

Charlie with an air of superiority asked, "Ah, but do you know who is shipping them?" <Give her a little information at a time. Pique her interest.>

<How much do I let him know that I know? If I know too much and he is working for them, will it make me a danger that they need to eliminate?> Lois replied, cautiously, "Well ... no ... not yet. But I ***will*!**" <That is if I live long enough.>

Charlie replied, "I can save you the trouble. ***I*** already ***know***." <Careful! Don't act too superior.>

Lois replied with caution, "OK, who is it then?" <He could just be baiting a trap by giving me information, or he could be feeding me a false lead. How can I tell?>

Charlie challenged, "Partners?" <Come on, give in.>

Lois put a stubborn look on her face and thought, <I guess the best thing will be to play along with him. Odd, I was just thinking that it might be good to have a partner. This isn't the way I pictured it though.> Lois then replied with an air of hedging her bets, "I don't know. It depends on how good your information is."

Charlie replied with confidence, "Oh, it's ***good*** alright. Partners?" <Come on. Just a little bit more.>

<I can't make it look too easy.> Lois gave in a little, "Well,

on a trial basis only. Partners. Who shipped the arms?"

Charlie replied, "L&M Enterprises, Inc." <A little bit at a time. Keep her interest.>

<Let's see just how far he will go.> Lois asked, "I saw that much on the bill of lading. What is L&M Enterprises, Inc.? Who's ***behind*** it?"

<Let's see how she responds to this piece of information.> Charlie responded with an air of superior knowledge, "Since we are ***partners***, I'll tell you. L&M stands for ***Lex Luthor*** and ***Miranda Michaels***. Names sound familiar?"

<Yeah, right. Like I'm really going to believe that! Who does he think he's kidding with that story. Lex Luthor, a criminal! That L could stand for Lionel for all I know. I'll need to see some hard evidence on that.> Lois sounded rather incredulous, "***Lex Luthor*???** You must be ***crazy***. He's a big shot ***philanthropist*** in Metropolis."

<A big story should entice her.> "That's another story we'll have if we're really partners. He's not what he appears to be, and I intend to prove it." He said this with finality.

"Wow. Okay, maybe we ***can*** work together. Partners, and I really mean it this time." Lois thought, <I need to play along with this until I can determine just what the real story is. I wonder if he is serious about the Luthor thing.>

Charlie said, "Okay partner, I think that the first order of business is to get some sleep. You can have one bed. I'll take the other." <Okay, she bought in. Now I need to just stay near her.>

<I need to make it look like I have fallen for his line. Since he knows so much, he probably knows who I am anyhow, so I won't really be telling him anything. Let's see if he does.> Lois somewhat contritely said, "OK, partner, but there is something I need to tell you. My name isn't really Linda King."

<She might be testing me. Do I let her know that I know who she is? I think I need to.> Charlie replied with assurance, "I know. It's Lois Lane."

<Bingo! Make it look good.> "What!!! How did you know??" Lois acted flabbergasted.

<How do I explain it?> Charlie replied, "I told you, I work for the Planet. Do you think that there is anyone on staff that doesn't know Lois Lane by sight?"

Lois couldn't help but smile at that comment. <Yeah, like I'm really going to believe a line like that. I have to give it to him though, he's creative. My picture hasn't appeared anywhere, so only the staff in Metropolis would know what I look like. I don't know what his game is ***yet***. I'll figure it out, but first I need to find out if he's a good guy. I hope he ***is*** on the side of the angels. From what I have seen so far, that would be my guess. I'm going to play this like he is. He certainly has been an angel to me. I've really enjoyed the time we've spent together, and he ***did*** save me from a dunking. If I'm going to 'play along' with him, I might as well enjoy it. Let's just relax and see what happens. He wants to be my partner. So okay, I'll ***let*** him be my partner. I just might be able to get along with this guy as a partner after all.> Then another thought hit her, <Boy, can he kiss!>

Chapter 12 — Undercover

March 1992

Charlie was elated that Lois had agreed to let him be her partner on the investigation without too much aggravation. "I'll go back to my car and get our bags," he said. They were both back packs, but he had left them in the car when he assisted her up the steps to their room. Although only her hands were damaged from the rope burn on the hawser, he had insisted on helping her. He enjoyed the feel of his arms around her. He said, "You can use the bathroom first if you want."

"Yeah, a little cleaning up will help," she responded. "I just brought overnight stuff and a change of clothes with me."

"Me too," he replied. As she disappeared into the bathroom, he looked at the twin beds. For some reason the two beds looked more suggestive to him than the queen bed in his suite in Brazzaville. A sudden flash of yearning seized him. <If only ... > Shaking his head to clear it, he left the room to go to the car. <At least Lois and I are in the same room for the first time.>

When he returned from the car with the bags, she grabbed hers and headed back into the bathroom to change. She hadn't anticipated sharing a room with anyone, let alone Charlie, but fortunately she had packed one of her more substantial night shirts, so she felt that she wouldn't be too embarrassed by not having a robe when she returned to the bedroom.

When she opened the door his eyes automatically turned in that direction and he caught his breath. The night shirt was of medium length, coming down to mid thigh. He caught himself staring and so did she. "Haven't you ever seen a pair of legs before?"

"Yes, but none as beautiful as yours."

She hadn't expected this kind of response, and when what he had said fully registered, she blushed prettily.

"Thanks. It's your turn in the bathroom."

He took his bag into the bathroom and cleaned up. When he came out, she was sitting up in the bed, already under the covers. When he came into the room, he was wearing sleep shorts and a baggy shirt.

She was impressed with what she could see and was unable to keep the surprise off her face at what she saw and tried to cover by throwing his words back at him. She said, "Nice legs." She thought, <No wonder he could pull me up so easily. Look at those arms, so strong and those legs! He must be a weight lifter. I wonder what the rest of his body looks like.> Determinedly Lois rolled over in her bed to present her back to his bed. Show him, she would.

The six hour drive back to Brazzaville the next day proved uneventful except for the bounces on the road. Lois and Charlie laughed and talked about the newspaper business. They compared notes on the investigation.

Lois didn't know all of the details of the shipping arrangements for the cargo, so Charlie filled her in. "Because of Livingston Falls, there really is no water access to Brazzaville from Pointe Noire. That is why the shipment will, of necessity, go by rail to Kinshasa. We should expect the cargo to be delivered to Kinshasa by rail about two weeks after it's shipped. After that it will be ferried across the Congo River to Brazzaville. We should be able to keep a watch on the ferry traffic starting about three to four weeks time to see it when it crosses. That way we can follow it. If for some reason we miss it when they send it across, I have identified the warehouses owned by L&M there in Brazzaville. That way if we miss the ferry, all we need to do is check the warehouse."

Their relationship had changed with ***the*** kiss at the warehouse and the subsequent revelations. Now Lois was really conflicted. With the revelation that he wasn't what she had thought him to be, she wasn't sure how to act. He was still the same guy even though he wasn't exactly who she thought he was. He still treated her the same way, maybe even a little better. She had to admit that she missed the cute French accent. Realistically even without the accent, he was still the same guy, and she still liked being with him.

Before they got back to Brazzaville, Charlie asked, "You know, since we are working together now, maybe we should, you know, uh, move in together, uh, that is, uh, if you wouldn't mind. We'd be able to do our planning and discuss, uh, strategy more easily. If you really objected, we could just leave things like they are, but I'd really like it if you'd consider it. We seemed to get along all right last night." The last was a plea and a bit of a puppy

dog look on Clark's part.

Lois pondered through the next five bumps. <I need to keep an eye on him to see if he contacts the gun runners. I can do that more easily if we are in the same suite.> "You may be right; it would be easier to plan. But how would it look for us to be in the same rooms, and would you be tempted to take advantage of the situation and me if I did?"

With a very shocked expression on his face, he sputtered, "Wha, no, I no, I'd never. I would never do anything like that. I would never force myself on you. I give you my solemn word."

She could tell by his shocked expression and the cute way he stuttered his response that he was sincere, so she said, "In that case, okay, I'll move in with you but into another bedroom; we aren't going to share a room, let alone a bed, got it?"

"Got it. You don't have to worry."

It was such a pleasant ride, Clark didn't even mind paying the 'jus'.

On Saturday night Lois moved out of 503 and took one of the spare bedrooms in suite 501. On Monday, March 30 after breakfast, Charlie discussed with Lois the possibility of going in to the local Daily Planet office.

"I'd like to go into the office and try to find out when the arms are going to be moved. Are you up for it?"

"The local Planet office? You've got to be kidding. I wanted to stay away from there. I don't want them hornin' in on this investigation." <The audacity! How did he convince the staff at the local office that he was legit? That ID wouldn't pass muster in Metropolis! Or, maybe they don't know what the current ID looks like. It was changed recently. I'll play along. If that's where this is leading, then lead on. Patience Lane, patience.> "Well, I guess as long as we are there together, it shouldn't be too bad. I just don't want them to know that Lois Lane is here."

"How about this. The name they know me by is Charlie King. You're going by Linda King. What does that suggest to you?"

"You want to pretend that we're married?"

"Well, yeah, it would hide your true identity and give us the perfect excuse for being together, not only there but the hotel as well."

"I guess it might work at that. I guess the first stop is a jeweler then."

"I know just the one and it's on the way."

Charlie was pleased with this outcome, since he knew that this needed to be the case. There was no record of Lois being in country once she left the airport. History had to be preserved. Accordingly the first stop was Artois' Jewelry Shoppe where he had sold the gem stones. Here he intended to purchase matching wedding rings.

M. Artois came out from behind the counter and embraced Charlie, "Charlot, mon ami, what can I do pour vous today?"

"M. Artois, we'd like to see a selection of wedding bands."

M. Artois looked over at Lois and said to Charlie soto voce, "Charlot, I t'ink we know each ozair well enough pour vous to call moi Jean-Luc. Elle es tres belle! You're a very lucky man!"

He answered, "Thank you Jean-Luc, I know I am."

The jeweler pulled out a tray of his most expensive wedding bands and placed it on the counter. Charlie called Lois over and asked, "What do you think?" Pointing to an ornately scrolled ring set, he said, "I kinda like these."

Lois was surprised by this turn of events. She had expected them to just get a couple of plain gold or silver bands, but Charlie was going all out. She thought about it for a few seconds. <I guess if he wants to spend the money on fancy bands, who am I to object? He wants it to look like we're married; I might as well find something I really like. Who knows if I'll ever get this chance again.> She looked them over carefully as a typical woman would. She looked up at m. Artois and said, "May I try a

few on?"

M. Artois replied, "Mais oui, but of course. Anysang for mon ami Charlot and 'ees lovely fiancée."

Linda accepted his praise graciously and examined the rings offered. She touched several of the rings with a delicate finger tip.

M. Artois smiled at Charlie who looked back at him and read the unspoken, "Ah, all women are alike" look in this eyes.

Charlie nodded back and shrugged slightly as if to say, "What can you do with women except love their little quirks?"

Linda actually saw several that she liked and was having a hard time deciding. She tried on one she really liked, but it was too large for her fourth finger, but knowing that could be fixed, she put it on a finger that it did fit. Then she picked another one and put it on her left index finger and then held her hand out under the light to compare the two.

Wiggling her fingers, she turned to Charlie. "What do you think of these, Charlot?"

Charlie couldn't help but suck in a breath at this little byplay. "I'm sure I'll like whatever you like, my dear." Unintentionally he sounded like a nervous groom.

She said, "Put the one you like on your finger, and we'll compare," Linda suggested.

Charlie complied. Putting on the one he liked, he was amazed to find it fit his fourth left finger perfectly. He suddenly had trouble controlling the shaking of his hand.

On impulse Linda gave him some mercy. "Oh, that looks good on you. Give it to me."

Puzzled, Charlie slid the ring off and gave it to her.

Linda slipped his ring on her third finger between the other two and made a show of comparing the three rings. "Yes, you're right. This is perfect for me too." She was surprised to find that that was a true statement. She really did think it was the perfect ring for her and found herself wishing that it wasn't just for a cover story.

Charlie turned back to m. Artois, "We'll take this set. Do you have it in her size?"

"I believe zo please to allow me to get zem out of zee back. 'ow do you want zem inscrib-ed? No sharge, of course."

Looking over at Lois with a questioning look she replied with a nod. "Mine will be LL to CK. Hers will be CK to LL. Merci bien!"

M. Artois then asked, "Is there a date you would like on it too?"

"No, we're kind of in flux with that."

The jeweler nodded and turned to the back room.

When they were alone, Linda whispered in surprise, "You gave him my actual initials!"

"Yeah, I didn't think there would be much chance of anyone but us looking at them. Besides it is customary to use your maiden name initials."

"You should have given your real initials then."

"I did."

"Oh, okay. It's really CK then?"

"Yep."

The rings were ready in record time Charlie paid for them, and they were on their way.

Lois was so surprised at the beauty of the small box that held both rings that she had to remark on it to Clark. Back in the car, he flipped open the box and slipped her ring on her finger with trembling fingers. <I hope someday I'll do this for real.> Then he swiftly put his own on his hand.

Lois had been amazed at the reception that Charlie received and from the owner of the shop. They were on a first name basis no less! It seemed that nothing was too good for him. The owner himself waited on them, and when they made their selection gave them a very sharp discount on the tag price and engraved the

rings for free. This was another mystery to add to the list. While Charlie was paying for the rings, she did a little window shopping, looking at engagement rings. She didn't realize that Charlie was watching every move she made.

Chapter 13 — The Confrontation

March 1992

Dressed in a short tan skirt and high heeled pumps, Linda made a big entrance to the local Daily Planet offices. The skirt and pumps showed off her well toned legs to advantage. She paired that with a pale blue sleeveless blouse which was unbuttoned to a point just above her bra so as to show off some cleavage.

Charlie hadn't been in the office for over two weeks, so when they arrived Suzanne and Colette ambushed him as soon as he entered the door. Both were trying to outdo the other as they vied for Charlie's attention. Lois noted this and thought, <Well, it appears as though I may have some competition. Just how long has he been here anyway? Just how well do they know him? Come on, Lane, it looks like you need to stake your claim!>

Claude saw Linda as soon as she walked in the door, and he thought she was alone because Suzanne and Colette had stopped Charlie at the door. Claude thought, <Wow, what a dish! I wonder who she is. How can I impress her?>. He jumped to his feet and hastened over to meet her. He said, “ello. Please to allow me to introduce myself, I am Claude Rochert. I am zee zenior reporter on zee staff ‘ere.” He reached for her hand and kissed the back of it. “***What*** can **I** do for ***you*** lovely lady?” Claude had continued to hold her hand as he finished speaking. He had practically been slobbering on her hand contrary to normal practice, and she didn't appreciate it in the least.

Charlie extricated himself from the twins and stepped to Lois' side and said, “Claude, I'd like you to meet Linda ***King***.” As Charlie said this, Linda removed her hand from Claude's grip.

As soon as Claude heard her name, he felt his world caving in. As she had walked in, he had immediately had thoughts of a candlelight dinner followed by a sexual liaison. Those thoughts were dashed by the implications of the name. “Linda ***King***?” He choked out. <This is so unfair. First the twins, now this very beautiful woman.>

Lois had removed her hand from Claude's grip and dramatically wiped the back of it on her skirt and then started twirling her newly acquired ring between her third and fifth fingers ostentatiously as she replied, “Yes, as in Mrs. Charlie King.” She made sure that she said it loud enough for Suzanne and Colette to hear. When she heard them gasp, she knew that she had staked her claim. Charlie smiled and reached over and gave her a hug. She in turn reached up with her hand and turned his face to hers and kissed him. Charlie was quite surprised but also very happy with this outcome and wished it was for real and not just for a cover story. Lois thought, <Mmmmm, I can't afford to do this too much. I won't want to quit.> When they broke the kiss, Derek came over. “Derek, I'd like you to meet Linda, my wife.”

Suzanne and Colette immediately went into a huddle.

Derek said, “I'm very pleased to meet you. Charlie said he had someone that would be joining him. He didn't tell us it would be a beautiful woman and that she was his wife. What brings you to the Congo?”

She made sure that she was speaking loud enough that everyone could hear her. “Well, you see Derek, I go where my husband goes. Charlie and I are a team. We're working on this gun running story together, but I had some things to finish up in Metropolis so he came on ahead.”

Claude was crestfallen. Suzanne and Colette stood there in shock, looking at each other and then back at the little drama unfolding before them. Charlie had never hinted he was married,

although it might not have mattered if he had.

Claude's hopes for a liaison with this lovely lady were dashed, his chances for getting in on this story as well. He thought that it was time to get back at Charlie for preventing him from working this story. He spoke up “Derek, just 'ow much do we know about zem?”

Derek replied dismissively, “Charlie showed me his ID. What else do I need to know?”

Claude, with a snide look on his face pulled out a FAX and handed it to him. “I zent a FAX asking personnel een Metropolis about Charlot King. Zay say zat zair ees no one by zat nam on staff.”

Derek looked over at Charlie and Linda and asked “Is this true?”

Linda pulled Derek aside and said to him “Of course there's no record, we're undercover.” She picked up a pencil and a piece of paper, looked at her watch did some mental arithmetic then wrote down a phone number and handed it to Derek. She said “If you call this number now, I think he'll still be awake.”

Derek asked “Who am I calling?”

“I'll let you find that out when he answers.”

Derek went to his desk and looked at the number. He recognized a Metropolis area code. He looked back at her and then dialed the number.

A phone in Metropolis started ringing. The person in the room thought, <it's 2 AM, who could be calling at this hour?> He picked up the phone on the second ring and said, “Perry White speaking.”

Derek almost dropped the phone and just stood there frozen. <She knows Perry White's home number!?!> “He stammered, “Uh, Mr. White, this uh, ahem, ah, this is Derek Price in the uh Brazzaville office. I, uh, I have a, uh, a woman here that says she knows you.”

Lois couldn't resist giving a startled Charlie a look and a smirk.

Perry said, “Put her on.”

Derek was in shock from these events. All he could force his muscles to do was to simply hold the phone out to Linda. She took it from his nerveless fingers and said, “Hi Perry.”

Perry said, “Lois! Is that ***you***, Darlin'?”

“Yeah Perry, it's me. I went undercover as soon as I arrived, and I want to stay that way, so no names please. There seems to be some question as to whether or not we work for the Planet. Could you please reassure Derek that we're on staff?”

Perry thought, <Why is she saying ***we***. Is she using the royal we to try and impress someone?> “What in Elvis' name are you doin' in the Congo? Of all the pig headed, stubborn ... You lied to me! You told me you were goin' on a vacation. I told you I didn't want you workin' that story, that I thought that investigation would be far too dangerous, but nooooo Mad Dog Lane has to go and do it on her own anyway. That story isn't goin' to be a walkin' tour of Graceland. I want you to get your dainty little behind on a plane and get back here pronto.”

“But Perry, we've already started the investigation. We have copies of the manifest and the bill of lading. We also have serial numbers from and pictures of the weapons. This investigation is well on the way.”

“What? When did you start? You've got that much already? Why are you using 'we' all the time?”

“Relax Perry, I'm not here all by myself. I'm here with my husband, Charlie. He's looking after me. We are ***partners*** after all. Who else could I depend on?”

Perry was sputtering as he replied, “Husband?!?! What husband???? You're not married, and you've never had a partner, you've ***always*** worked ***alone***.”

Fortunately with the phone pressed to her ear, she and Charlie were the only ones that could hear what Perry was saying.

Charlie had an amused smile on his face from listening in. <What a woman.>

Lois replied, <Let's see, how can I phrase this so that I don't give too much away.> "Circumstances change and so do people, Perry; you know you don't have to worry as long as Charlie's with me. We're together and liking it. He takes such good care of me you should be very well satisfied. He's such an angel, and he won't let anything happen."

Perry replied, "Who is he? What's the arrangement? Is he someone from the Brazzaville office? Do you trust him?"

Lois replied, "I'll have to talk to you later about that. We've already had some scrapes that Charlie has had to pull us out of. We'll be okay, and yes, I do."

With a tone of capitulation in his voice, Perry said, "I never could get you to look before you leaped. I just never can win with you. Alright, Darlin', I trust your judgment most of the time anyhow. I didn't want you doin' this investigation, and you chose to do it anyway, but I feel a little bit better having you tell me that you have a partner now."

"Yes, I have my partner with me, and I've always brought in the story!"

"Yes, you've always brought in the story. That's true. Alright, put Derek back on. I'll take care of it. I don't like it, but you've always done things your own way anyhow. You just be careful, you hear me? I hope that your faith in this new 'husband' of yours isn't misplaced"

"Okay, Daddy. Your little girl will be careful. Thanks Perry, I'll see you when this investigation is wrapped up. As to the other thing, I'm sure it isn't."

Lois held the phone back out to Derek. He took it and put it up to his ear.

"Derek Price here."

Perry replied, "You have my top investigative reporter there with you. You take good care of her. I want her back in one piece you hear? If she gets hurt, by Elvis, you'll pay for it."

Derek, properly cowed replied, "What about her partner? Isn't that his responsibility?"

On the other end of the line there was a short pause then Perry said, "Yes, you're right, it is. Okay, give her anything she wants. I expect total cooperation. This is a ***big*** story as I'm sure you are aware."

Derek replied, "Total cooperation. Got it." He hung the phone up. "Okay, what do you need? The entire resources of this office are at your disposal."

To say that Claude was crushed by this outcome would be an understatement. He hadn't considered the possibility that they could be undercover and therefore be using false names of which personnel would have no record.

Derek turned to Claude and said, "Are you satisfied now? You made me bother the ***big*** man with your fantasies. Don't you have somewhere you have to be?"

Claude knew he was being dismissed and said, "I t'ink I'll go interview zumone." He left hurriedly.

After Claude had departed, Charlie said, "We'll be in and out of the office for the next week or so. We have some things to follow up on and will be using the computer. In three or four weeks we may be trekking into the interior, but we're not sure about that yet; we'll wait and see." With that he and Linda went over to his desk, and he started working on the computer.

Linda pulled up a chair, so that she was sitting right next to him. When she crossed her legs, her already short skirt hiked a little further up her leg revealing even more than had been visible when she was in her night shirt that night in Pointe Noir. He found himself staring at her legs, and she caught him doing so.

When Linda caught his stare and thinking about the night they had spent in the room in Pointe Noir and the comment he had made about her legs that night, she smiled. Deciding to play a

little, she shifted her position, re-crossing her legs but doing it slowly and sensually and seeing to it that her skirt rode up just a little bit higher than the last time. Observing his response to her actions, she had a hard time suppressing a laugh. Charlie could feel his heart starting to race, and he couldn't bear to tear his eyes away from the view she was giving him. He thought back to the time that Suzanne had sat next to him in that very same chair. As he did, he finally managed to pull his eyes away from her legs and up to her face where he saw her Mona Lisa smile. She asked, "Is it hot in here?" As she asked this, her hands went to her neckline and she unbuttoned another button and pulled the lapels of her blouse apart revealing not just her cleavage but the upper swell of both breasts. The realization hit him that she knew exactly what she was doing and doing it deliberately. That, however, didn't change the fact that he liked what he saw. Her actions were pushing him more than anything that Suzanne or Colette had done. Charlie couldn't get over it; Linda wasn't dressed as provocatively as Suzanne had been that day not so awfully long ago, but he found that he was even more distracted with Linda sitting next to him, and he loved it. Reluctantly he mentally shook himself and turned to the computer to begin the search; as he did so, he could hear her merry giggle.

Without them realizing it, this was all being observed by Suzanne and Colette. Suzanne knew that she had sat in the same location next to him on the occasion when they were getting his computer set up. She also realized that even though he had looked at her legs and other parts of her anatomy, when she had actually been using the occasion to try an entice him that he had not looked at her the same way. In a quiet voice she said to Colette, "Je peux voir maintenant comment il a pu résister à nous. Il est totalement engagé à lui. Nous avons jamais eu l'occasion. (tr: "I can see now how he was able to resist us. He is totally committed to her. We never had a chance.)"

After a few hours they took a break and went out for lunch. They had managed to get the railroad schedule for the line going from Pointe Noire to Kinshasa. They were able to get the lading information and found that the train with the arms cargo was scheduled to depart Pointe Noire on Monday two weeks hence. It wouldn't arrive in Kinshasa until two weeks later. They expected that it would be ferried across within a few days of its arrival which gave them a few weeks to relax and prepare.

While they were at lunch, Lois broached the subject of Suzanne and Colette. "So, what is it with you and the twins?"

Charlie replied, "Well, they're just good friends."

Lois snorted in a very unladylike way. "Not from what I saw. They were practically trying to seduce you right there in front of me." <I can't believe that I'm feeling jealous about that. I like Charlie, but ... Maybe I like him more than I thought. I ***was*** regretting that I would be leaving him when I finished this investigation. I was even thinking about staying here in the Brazzaville office to be near him. We are partners now. But that doesn't mean that I have any claim on him, and he doesn't have any claim on me. Does he? I do like him. I like him more than anyone else I have ever dated. Apparently we are going to be together for a long time on this investigation. We are pretending to be husband and wife. Let's see how it all works out. Perhaps this could be a good thing, I hope.>

Charlie replied, "Well, OK, there was a time when they did try to get me into a relationship. But I told them that I was already spoken for."

Lois responded by holding up her left hand, "You have been planning this for how long?"

Charlie got defensive and stammered out, "No, no, not until today. I didn't have that planned. It was just a thought I had today. I, I didn't tell them I was married I just said that there was someone else."

"So, you lied to them." Lois accused

Charlie got a very odd expression on his face as he responded, “No, it was no lie. I knew you were coming.”

Lois was surprised at this remark. She asked, “How did you know I was going to be here? I didn’t even tell Perry about the trip until the last minute. You have obviously been here for a while.”

Charlie got a somewhat wistful expression on his face as he replied, “Lois, I know that you just met me a little over two weeks ago, but I have known you longer than that. I knew to the minute when you would be stepping off that plane and have been looking forward to seeing you descend that ramp for a couple of months. I know that sounds silly. It sounds like something straight out of a science fiction novel, but nonetheless it’s true. In truth I have been waiting for a little over five years to meet you.”

Lois was blown away by this. <What is he talking about? Five years ago I was in college. I don’t remember ever seeing him. Is he some kind of nut case? Was he stalking me? Is this some kind of sick joke? How could he have been waiting for five years? We’ve been together for over two weeks, and I haven’t noticed anything unusual. If anything, he has treated me exceptionally well.> “Well, uh, Charlie, that is very interesting, but how could that possibly be?”

“I know it sounds weird. Please believe me that I’m not a nut case. There is an explanation. I just ask that you take my word for it that it’s true, and I can explain. Someday, hopefully, soon, I’ll be able to tell you the entire story, and when I do, you’ll believe me. For now all I ask is that we be partners in this investigation. That we can work together is the fulfillment of my dream. I hope you see that this will work out for our mutual good.”

Lois relented somewhat, “Ok. We have been working well together so far, but if you cross the line, I’m outta here. Got that?”

Charlie replied somewhat subdued, “Got it. You don’t have to worry. You’ll see. In the end everything will work out.”

Chapter 14 — A River Rescue

Charlie and Lois were still at lunch after their visit to the local Daily Planet office. Charlie understood Lois asserting her independence in the partnership because she wouldn’t be Lois if she didn’t. But he couldn’t afford to let her leave him. He needed her near him so that he could protect her therefore he had to enlist her help in the rest of the enterprise.

Clearing his throat he began, “Okay, now that that’s settled, we are going to need to get transportation to go up the river. In any other area we might be able to drive, but this close to the river we will have to contend with some rather dense jungle, so driving is out of the question. Like I told you on the trip north, they are going to have to ship them by riverboat from here. Overland just isn’t feasible. I’ve done my homework, and I know where they are taking the smuggled weapons, and that’s north of Dongou. In order to follow them to make sure that I’m right, we need a boat. It’ll need to be a boat that looks like a regular private boat.”

Surprised to see Lois wiggling in her seat, he wondered what that was about. <Is she getting excited about finally getting this investigation moving ahead, or is it excitement at spending more time with me, I can only hope. Could it be both? Oh well, what do I have to lose?> He spoke up, “I see you fidgeting, is there a problem?”

Her reply wasn’t anywhere near what he had expected, “Except for a cruise ship, I’ve really never been on a boat before. Is it really safe?”

Relieved that this was all that it was, Charlie relaxed and replied, “Boating is one of the safest methods of travel, especially since we will be on the river. If we were on the ocean and a severe storm came up, we might have a problem, but that is less likely here. I feel certain that you will enjoy it once we start.”

Feeling reassured Lois said, “Okay, mister voice of

experience, I’ll take your word for it.”

After lunch they headed down to the marina. When they got there, they found that a fishing boat; the Ubuntu was for sale. She was a trim twin masted sailing craft called a ketch, fifteen meters long and four and one half meters wide. With a full load she would only draw about two and a quarter meters. That meant that she would be stable in storms, and with the light draft she wouldn’t run aground too easily. This feature wasn’t even really necessary unless they chose to run very close inshore since the Congo River is one of the deepest rivers in the world.

The Ubuntu had an inboard motor, a cabin with a galley, bunks for four in two separate compartments, and a head forward. The accommodations were forward of the galley. The galley had a propane powered range and refrigerator of good size. They could carry enough fresh food for about a week’s cruise. The helm was in the stern and consisted of a wheel, the engine controls and a binnacle for the compass. Even though it was fifteen meters in length, it would not require any additional crew because they would be under power the entire time. Since this was the Congo, the price was more than reasonable, so Charlie bought it.

Linda thought, <This is another odd thing to add to the list. Where is he getting all of his money? This isn’t something he could afford on a stringer’s salary. And that suite! He must be independently wealthy or else he’s on a government expense account and Uncle Sugar is paying.> Then she stared down at her ring. Where had he gotten the money for this very expensive ring? She hoped that the answer would be that there were some things that were personal. Should she ask him sometime? Maybe sometime but not now she decided.

Furthermore, to add to her surprise, the first thing he did was commission a shop to give the engine an overhaul and pulled the boat itself out of the water to check the hull integrity. Once he was satisfied that she was sound, he had her put back in the water.

They started outfitting her with supplies and equipment that they thought would be needed on the trip. One of the main items was extra fuel tanks and fuel. They were looking at over twenty three hundred kilometers of river travel round trip. Charlie told Linda that he knew where the arms would be transhipped from the river to land but that he wanted as much as was practical to follow them, just in case.

The engine overhaul was completed in record time, thanks in part to the bonus Charlie promised. The boat was ready to go before the shipment arrived in Kinshasa; now they just had to wait a few days.

They spent all the remaining time together, part of the time spent in discussing their plans. Charlie told her, “I think that as soon as we can, we should move onboard the Ubuntu. By doing that, we’ll be ready to leave at a moment’s notice.”

“I agree with you; besides I’m kinda looking forward to being onboard. When will it be ready?”

Charlie corrected her politely, “She, not it.”

“Why is a boat always a she?”

Clark’s lips twisted in amusement. That was like Lois. Always challenging. He shrugged. “I don’t know. Boats always have the pronoun ‘she.’ Maybe because all the sailors were men? Another theory is that they are called ‘she’ because they are temperamental and unpredictable like a woman.”

Her temper flared at this and she responded with some heat, “What do you mean by that? Do you think I’m temperamental and unpredictable?”

Laughing to try and defuse some of her anger he replied, “Hey, don’t shoot the messenger! I wasn’t saying that I felt that way! I’m just being a good reporter and reporting the facts as I know them.”

Mollified somewhat she moved on to the other theory, “No

women sailors? I know bupkis about boats.”

Breaking into a full grin, he reposted, “That I can see. Did you know that women in the Hawaiian Islands in ancient days were not only forbidden to be on a boat but to touch a boat, really a canoe, while it was being built?”

Lois swatted his chest in mock frustration. “You and your history lessons. How much trivia do you know?”

“You’d be surprised, Lois. I read a lot and have traveled a lot. All over the world, as a matter of fact.”

“Hmmpf.”

Not able to resist teasing her, he smiled even wider. “Also the women were not allowed to eat bananas which grew plentifully on the islands.”

“You are kidding, aren’t you! Why ever not?” Lois looked at him incredulously. Then she saw the twinkle in his eyes.

“Figure it out, Lois. The men thought it was bad luck, and the gods would have them drown in the sea when they went fishing.”

Shaking her head, Lois commented, “You’re a strange one, Charlie King.”

“No argument there, Lois. No argument. Well, to business. The refit’s almost complete. They are working on your cabin right now. I think you’ll be pleased with the upgrades when it’s finished.”

“I can’t wait to see. Exactly what are they doing?”

“Well they are installing additional cabinets and some mirrors. You’ll have extra closet space as well as additional drawer space. They are also giving you a better mattress and some other amenities. In order to do all of this, they needed to remove the second bunk to get the needed room.”

“I think we can start buying the foodstuffs and other staples that we’re going to need tomorrow. We shouldn’t be interrupting the work with that.”

They spent a lot of time just enjoying being together. Lois wondered, <Is this what married life would be like with Charlie? We are sort of acting like a married couple, and I like it.>

Charlie was thinking, <Things are going so well, I can’t get over it. I know how things were with Lois and her Clark. I really think that we can have the same thing. I look forward to the day I can tell her everything.>

A few days after the ship was ready they checked out of the Bonne Nuit de Sommeil and moved aboard the Ubuntu. Lois got her first look at her cabin. She turned around and threw herself into Charlie’s arms. “I love it! You’re so sweet to have decorated it that way for me. It looks so comfortable compared to the way it was. That bed ...”

“It’s called a bunk.”

“Okay, that bunk looks so comfortable. I may not want to get out of it.”

“I’m glad you like it. Go ahead and get settled in. If you want to try out the new bunk by taking a nap, go for it.”

Laughing she replied, “I just might do that.”

A couple of days later Charlie went over the handling of the Ubuntu with Linda. “The helm on a small ship like this is very similar to the steering wheel of a car. There are certain things that a boat or larger ship will do when you reverse that a car will not. Have you ever backed up a car with a trailer?”

Lois nodded, “That I ***have*** done.”

“Well, this is similar yet still different. The stern will kick to the port side when you reverse suddenly because of the torque of the prop, and you need to be prepared for that when you’re in close quarters.”

“The throttle is like the hand throttle on a handicapped car. But,” he held up an admonishing finger, making sure he had her attention, “be careful that before you shift into reverse that you idle the throttle. That is one aspect that is just like a car; if you don’t idle the throttle, you could strip the gears. We’ll do some practice out in open water so that you can get the feel of it before

we try in the slip.”

She stopped him and asked, “Port, which way is that?”

With a mischievous look Clark answered, “Now, that all depends on which way you are facing. If you are facing the stern, you do know what the stern is, don’t you?”

With a somewhat exasperated air she replied, “That’s the back, right?”

Barely managing to suppress his laughter he replied, “No, not the back right, just the back. Okay, now that we have established that fact, you do know what the bow is. When I said, ‘he had to climb the bow hawser,’ you moved in the correct direction. Now, if you are facing the stern, the port side is on your right, and if you are facing the bow, it will be on your left. The accepted practice is to give all directions in relation to facing the bow since that generally is the direction of travel. So when you are facing the bow, port is on your left hand and that leaves starboard on the right. Do you have any idea where these terms came from?”

Knowing just what was coming and yet not knowing just how to avoid it without hurting his feelings she said, “No, but I guess that you’re about to tell me, aren’t you. This is more of you unending fount of trivia, isn’t it?”

Laughing he replied, “You got me, yes, it is. Well, the port side wasn’t always called port. Originally it was larboard which simply meant the opposite of starboard. The similarity of the name caused some confusion, so it slowly came into practice to call that side port because, invariably that was the side of the ship that was brought into the wharf when they moored in the port so that became the port side or just port.”

“Here’s a question for you, remember I told you that because of Livingstone Falls that there is no direct access to the Atlantic?” She nodded her acknowledgement, and he continued, “Well, one way around that would be to build a canal. There are some famous canals in the world. Which was built first, the Suez Canal or the Panama Canal?”

Lois just looked at Charlie. What had happened to Charlie, the French speaking charming man she had known? He was distancing himself from her, she was sure. Had he taken the ‘work partners only’ speech too seriously? She didn’t think she liked that. “Ah, I’m going to guess, the Suez Canal.”

“Right you are! Give the lady a prize!”

Lois thought she knew the prize she wanted, but right now it didn’t look like she was going to get it anytime soon.

Apparently oblivious to Lois’ mood, Charlie jovially continued, “It was completed in 1869 after 10 years’ construction. The Panama Canal was finished in 1914, but some of the early work started in 1880 and some of the same people worked on the Panama Canal. Locally, there aren’t any plans to build a canal. It’s more important to turn all that energy to common use so they are building dams for hydro-electric generation.

Lois mimed a hand covering her mouth in a yawn.

“Fascinating,” she said.

Even Clark could see that sign of boredom. “Get some rest, and then we’ll have another lesson in seamanship.”

Later Charlie took Linda out on some short cruises to get her familiar with the handling of a craft of the Ubuntu’s size. Linda was an apt pupil and before very long was able to take the boat out onto the river and bring her back in and dock with hardly a bump.

“Excellently done. You put her right where she needed to be.” Linda was surprised with herself. She found that she enjoyed piloting the Ubuntu almost as much as driving a car, even though it didn’t move as fast. Additionally she was pleased with the praise Charlie gave her for the skill she was demonstrating. She liked to have ***him*** praise her more than anyone else she knew and that included Perry White.

While he was tying up, Charlie suggested that Lois go below and start the supper. Lois replied “If you want to live long enough

to follow through on this investigation, you won't ask me to do that. I can make exactly three things and two of them involve chocolate. Can we order take out?"

Charlie laughed and replied, "Point taken. As soon as I'm done here I'll start dinner."

One day they were out on a cruise some kilometers north of Brazzaville when it started to cloud over.

Clark shouted over the noise of the building wind, "I don't like the looks of those clouds! I think we need to head back to port! Bring her about and head back!"

Half way laughing she replied, "Aye, Aye, Captain!" as she swung the wheel around.

They were still about ten kilometers from Brazzaville when the storm broke with high winds, driving rain, lightning, and thunder. Just before the storm broke, Charlie had observed a number of other craft headed in the same direction. A good number of them were pleasure craft owned by the more well to do families. He saw one of the craft, a small sailing vessel, that when the first gusts of wind hit heeled over and almost capsized because they hadn't reefed their sails.

"Linda, look over there," He pointed over the port side at a small craft. "They are in trouble. Bring us in close to them."

Linda brought the Ubuntu to within hailing distance. By now they could see that the craft was manned only by a woman and three children, one of them a teen.

Charlie shouted to them, "Vous êtes ayant besoin d'aide ? Nous sommes prêts à vous à bord et prendre votre embarcation en remorque! " (Tr: "Are you in need of assistance? We are prepared to take you on board and take your craft in tow!")

The woman replied, "Remercier le ciel que vous soyez ici ! Oui, nous avons absolument besoin d'aide!" (Tr: "Thank heaven you are here! Yes, we definitely need help!")

A/N: The rest will be translated for you.

Charlie shouted over, "Lower all of your sails!"

She replied, "The lines are fouled! We can't lower them!"

Charlie shouted, "Linda, bring us to within a few meters. I need to throw them a line."

Linda brought them to within three meters. He then took a line in hand and shouted, "Catch this line and tie it off to a cleat in the bow." He tossed the line, and it was caught by the teenager who proceeded to follow directions and very shortly had the line properly tied. Charlie then allowed three meters of slack before tying his end of the line to a cleat in the stern of the Ubuntu.

Once this was done, he directed Linda to start out slowly, just enough speed that the wind wasn't controlling the boat, but they were. Charlie then pulled the line in, hand over hand until he had the other craft alongside. While he held the line, Linda came over to the port side to lend the woman and kids a hand as they moved aboard the Ubuntu.

As soon as they were aboard, Charlie allowed the line to pay out slowly until it was at full stretch. He took over the helm and had Linda take their passengers into the cabin and make them comfortable. She was just as happy to be under cover as their passengers were. She was just sorry that Charlie had to stay at the helm getting soaked by rain and spray.

When they reached the port area, rather than try to pull back into their slip, especially since they had the other craft in tow, he anchored in the sheltered bay area created by the port facilities until the storm would pass. By the time they anchored, the craft they were towing was completely swamped. Charlie was convinced that they would never have made it to port safely and that all would have been lost.

Charlie thought about this for a while. He marveled at the wisdom Herb had shown in not allowing him to immediately intervene with Lois and take her back to Metropolis. If they had done that, this rescue would never have occurred. There was no

telling what the results of this act could be in ten years or a centuries' time. All he knew for sure right now was that he felt good about the rescue.

After anchoring, Charlie joined Linda and their passengers in the cabin. He addressed the woman and said, "I'm afraid that your craft has foundered. She will need some work to get her shipshape again."

She replied, "Please allow me to introduce myself, I am Madam Madeleine D'Arnet (Mad'-i-lane Dar'-nay). These are my children Jean-Jacques, Mimi, and Yvette. My husband Jacques is the mayor of Brazzaville. He will see to it that she is fixed up again. I don't know how to thank you and your wife. You saved me and my children. We surely would have drowned if you hadn't come along and helped us."

Charlie replied, "No special thanks are needed. No mariner could allow another to go down without offering to help."

"Just the same, I would like to invite both of you to come to the Mayor's residence for dinner tomorrow night so that I can introduce you to my husband, and he can thank you for preserving his family. I will not take no for an answer." All of this conversation had been conducted in French, and Charlie had been translating for Linda the entire time.

Charlie asked Linda about this, and she didn't object, so he graciously accepted the invitation for the both of them.

The next evening

Charlie put on his best GQ style dress suit for the evening ,and Linda dressed in a white linen sleeveless dress with a scoop neck, fitted bodice, and full skirt which came to mid calf with white high heeled pumps.

She said, "My, don't you look nice this evening!"

He replied, "Not nearly so nice as you my dear." <This is going to be a real trial. We'll be acting as husband and wife. I look forward to it, and I dread it. To be so close to her. Wait a minute. Maybe I can turn this to my advantage. A world of possibilities could open up. What if ... Can't a Mayor perform weddings? ... Nah, she'd never go along with it. Too soon, too soon.>

When they arrived at the Mayoral residence that evening, there was a crowd of photographers and newspaper reporters there. Included in the throng were Derek Price, Suzanne and Colette. Since they were colleagues, they gave them a special exclusive interview for the Planet.

They posed for some photographs. Mostly the pictures were of them side by side with their arms around each other. Some of them were where Charlie insisted that they be kissing. There were some with the Mayor's family.

The Mayor had invited most of the high government officials to the dinner and introduced Linda and Charlie to all of them as the saviors of his wife and children. In a speech he affirmed his eternal gratitude for the selfless act by two former strangers, now friends, of saving his family from a watery grave. In essence he gave them the key to the city.

They modestly accepted his thanks and stated that they had been unaware of who the people they were rescuing were. All they knew was that there was a vessel in distress and that they would have performed the same action for anyone in a similar situation.

After they returned to the Ubuntu, they spent some time cuddling. This adventure had moved their relationship half a step ahead.

After he returned to his own time, Clark would request copies of the original photos from the agencies that were there so that he could have the pictures of Lois and himself, together. He realized at that time that this was another clue he had missed when doing

his search. It had never occurred to him that there would be something in the newspaper about them.

Chapter 15 — The Cruise on the Ubuntu

May 8, 1992

From their slip in the port Charlie and Lois were able to observe the river traffic and were not too surprised when they saw the ferry with the arms cargo cross the river to the Brazzaville side. They knew that it would soon be time to head out.

It was, however, almost a week before they saw some river boats pull in to the dock at Brazzaville. The riverboats had apparently been delayed on returning from their last trip.

That evening Charlie prepared dinner, and after eating they cleaned up. Once this was accomplished, they removed the cushions from the dining area and placed them on the floor and wall of the cabin to form a couch. After they were seated, Clark put his arm across her shoulders and started the conversation.

“They looked like they were nearly finished loading when we came below. Do you think that they’ll start right away?”

“You know more about this boating stuff than I do, which brings up a question. How do you know so much about boating, being from Kansas?”

“Okay, well, in the summers we would go sailing on Smallville Lake. It was a small sailboat about the size of the D’Arnet’s boat. Then occasionally we would vacation in Maryland and go out on the Chesapeake Bay. That was in a power boat just about the size of this one. Being here on the Ubuntu is a lot like those vacations.”

“That sounds nice, and I think I would have enjoyed it. We have nice facilities here on the Ubuntu, and I like having a bathroom. We always used to go into the mountains and camp, so I guess that’s why I hate camping so much. You don’t always have a bathroom available. I guess we’ll be doing some of that on this trip, so I guess I’ll just have to deal with it.”

“What do you think about the riverboats?”

“I wouldn’t think that they would travel too much at night, would you?”

“I agree. They’ll probably wait until morning to head out. Now what do you think we should do? I have an idea, but I want to see what you think.”

“Well, we don’t want them to know that we’re tailing them, but we do want to monitor their progress. If they keep seeing us following them, they’re bound to get suspicious.”

“How about this, we can do like we did when I was a kid on vacation. We can travel by day and anchor at night. During the day we may pass them or they may pass us. We need to make it look like we’re just out on a pleasure trip. What do you think?”

“I think we are looking at a week-long pleasure trip. I can deal with that. We have those deck chairs we picked up during the refit. I have a couple of good books. I’m sure we can look the part.”

“Okay, that’s settled. Now, when do you think we should start?”

“Well, if we pull out right after them it might look suspicious. What do you think about a head start?”

“Yeah, I think that would be best. Let’s see, it’s about 7 PM now. I think that we shouldn’t let them see us leave. Why don’t we wait until about 10:30? We can travel upriver a distance and anchor and wait for them to pass us in the morning. We’ll get some idea about how fast they’ll be moving and how long the entire trip will take by doing that.”

“Sounds like a plan. What do we do in the mean time?”

“Did I ever tell you about my trip to Borneo ... ?”

True to plan, they pulled in their spring lines and got under way at 10:30 PM.

Proceeding upriver for a distance of sixty kilometers, they found an anchorage on the east side of the river. Charlie prepared a light snack for them, and after eating he and Lois headed off to their respective bunks.

When they got up shortly after dawn, Charlie prepared their breakfast which they took up on deck. At 10 AM realizing that they had some time to kill, Lois went below, reappearing shortly afterward in a one piece bathing suit.

“Since we have to wait for them to pass by, I thought I’d go for a swim. Do you think it’s safe? There aren’t any Piranhas in the river, are there?”

Laughing he replied, “I don’t think so. To the best of my knowledge, Piranhas are native to the waters of South America. Do you think you will need a life guard?”

“I don’t think so, but it would be nice to have you join me.” She said coquettishly looking up at him from under her lashes.

Unable to resist such a request, Charlie disappeared below to change. It was hard for him to restrain himself and change at normal human speed; he was so excited by her request. When he reappeared on deck, he was wearing swimming trunks and a T-shirt.

When Charlie came back on deck, she gave him an appraising look which turned into an open-mouthed stare when he stripped off the T-shirt and dove into the water.

Lois’ thoughts went wild. <Wow, I’m impressed! It sure looks like he works out, nice physique. Why does he hide all that under those baggy clothes?>

Charlie and Lois were both cavorting about in the water, splashing each other, and having a lot of fun at about 11:00 AM when they saw the flotilla as it came past. As he was distracted by the passing flotilla and looking away from Lois, she dove underwater and swam under Charlie. Grabbing his ankle she pulled him underwater unexpectedly. He allowed himself to drift lower, and when he had reached the same depth as she, he grabbed her and initiated a kiss. Using his strong legs to kick, he sent them both back to the surface, still in an embrace and still kissing. She soon realized that she didn’t have to do anything to stay afloat, so she relaxed in his arms, and her arms went around his neck as the kiss deepened. When she relaxed her body melded into his. Through the light material of her suit, she could feel the strong muscles of his chest, and her nipples began to harden with the contact. Since she didn’t need to kick to stay afloat, she was relaxed and as her lower abdomen came into contact with his lower body she could feel the bulge of his manhood against her thigh. <Ummm, I can feel his reaction to me. He seems to be trying to hide it from me though. I guess he just doesn’t feel comfortable enough with me yet to let me know how he really feels.>

After several minutes they broke the kiss and Lois climbed back aboard the Ubuntu. As Lois was drying her hair, she realized that Charlie was still in the water. The one piece suit she was wearing was a Speedo, just a light weight stretchy fabric without built in cups. She leaned over the side to look at him, which gave him a view of her nipples poking against the light material of her swim suit. That didn’t help him to control his thoughts in the slightest, in fact quite the opposite. Charlie had stayed in the water so that he could regain some measure of control before climbing back onboard, but this view was not helping at all. He knew that he would have to stay in the water even longer.

Lois asked, “Why are you still in the water? Don’t we need to get moving?”

Embarrassed Charlie stammered his reply, “Yes, uh, yeah we need to get moving, uh, but uh, not, uh, hot right now, uh I mean uh, not right now, uh, in a few minutes. Yeah, a few minutes. I think I’ll check the rudder and make sure it isn’t fouled.

Lois was surprised at this statement. “It wasn’t fouled when we stopped. How could it have become fouled?” <That’s so cute!

He's embarrassed about how his body is responding to mine.> Looking down at herself she could see her nipples making their presence known. <Heaven knows I could be embarrassed about mine, but it's natural. He's trying to hide his response to me.>

"Well, I'll just check anyhow. I'll come aboard in a few minutes."

<I think I'll let him off the hook.> "Alright, I'll go get changed. See you in a few."

After she went below, Charlie was able to regain some control and return to the deck. He quickly dried off and pulled his jeans on over his trunks and pulled on his shirt before she reappeared on deck.

Assuming that the riverboats had departed Brazzaville at about 8:00 AM, they estimated that they were moving at about ten knots or eleven miles per hour. About two hours after the flotilla passed, they weighed the anchor and made way upriver in their wake at about fifteen knots.

Lois was amazed to find that she was a lot more comfortable in Charlie's presence since their relationship was moving ahead. That underwater kiss had startled her at first, but realizing that she trusted Charlie and confident that he wouldn't allow either of them to drown, she had relaxed in his embrace and really enjoyed the experience. In all honesty she had found the experience to be sexy and exciting. To be in his embrace wearing so little and to feel his arousal ... she had been getting turned on as evidenced by her hardened nipples.

She had worried that Charlie was distancing himself from her, but that seemed to have changed somehow. Perhaps playing the couple to the media after the rescue had helped.

After helping Charlie weigh the anchor and get under way, she disappeared into her cabin. She had started thinking about Suzanne and Colette and how their behavior toward Charlie bothered her. Charlie had told her about the time he had spent with them. When he had told her about going out with them to learn about the local night spots before her arrival, he had mentioned dancing with Suzanne. She had had to smile about that one. That explained why he was so gun shy when they were on the dance floor. He had been acting like a scared rabbit afraid that she would be climbing all over him the way Suzanne had. Maybe in the future she would consider it. But right now she wanted some time to think without the distraction of seeing him.

In her cabin sitting on her bunk absently staring out of the porthole at the passing scenery, Lois was lost in thought because she was still having a hard time reconciling her feelings about him. <One thing I'm sure of at this point is that Charlie is ***not*** in with the arms dealers. He is on the side of the angels. He hasn't contacted anyone and seems to be really serious about this investigation. We've spent a lot of time together, and he never seems to run out of things to talk about ... his stories about his world travels, the things he has seen and done, and the stories he's written for foreign papers. I can't wait to see some of these souvenirs he's told me about. I could listen to him talk for hours. Actually I ***have*** listened to him talk for hours. I haven't traveled nearly as much as him, so I don't have as many stories along that line, but he seemed to be impressed with my work as well. We really haven't talked about our families. I ***know*** why ***I*** haven't. I don't want to get depressed, and I don't want to burden him with my troubles. Stories aside, we've hardly talked at all about our relationship and where it's going aside from acknowledging that we like to be together, and I think he wants us to stay together. I really like him a ***lot***! It's like he's become the best friend I have ever had, and he's a hunk. We ***have*** been having a lot of fun together ***and*** have gotten to know each other pretty intimately. He seems to know what I'm thinking a lot of the time and that makes me feel ... ***special*** somehow.>

<I've had some real federal disasters as relationships in the past. Every guy I have been interested in has basically been after

only one thing, and since I haven't been willing to give that up, they've all walked out on me. Charlie seems to be different from all the rest, but do I want to risk it again? Should I allow this relationship to proceed? We've been together for almost two months now, and the relationship we've formed is growing, but what if he just walks out on me the same way as all the rest? Do I want to risk that?>

<But he said that he had been waiting five years to meet me. I still don't know how that's possible, but maybe he was speaking figuratively. That must be it, like saying, 'I've been waiting all my life to meet you'. He has just been waiting for the right person to come along, but does he really think I'm the right person for him? I think he does, but am I? Is he the right man for me? I ***am*** drawn to him almost like a moth to a flame, but am I going to get burned? Every time we kiss it's like I just want it to go on forever! That night on the docks ... wow ... every time I think of that kiss ... my toes ***still*** curl. He just does something to me. I almost think that sex couldn't be better, could it? With him???>

Her focus moved from the scenery outside to her own image in the mirror as if she were talking to herself. <I wonder just how far he went with Suzanne and Colette. They were ***obviously*** attracted to him. For heaven's sake they were trying to seduce him the minute he walked into the office with me right there! He said that ***they*** were just ***friends***.> She stood up and gave herself a very critical appraising look in the mirror and asked herself, <What have they got that I don't have?> A smile creased her lips and with a light chuckle she corrected herself. <No, the real question is what do I have that they don't? The answer is Charlie! He ***chose me*** over ***them***!>

<He says he wants a relationship, but what kind of relationship does he want? A long time ago I decided that my job was going to be my first priority, but this time with Charlie has started me thinking that I may have been wrong. Why couldn't I have a life and a job instead of my job being my life? We're here on a job, and I'm enjoying my life being with him. But does he just want a fling, or does he want a serious commitment? I used to think that marriage and job don't mix, but I don't think I like the idea of 'One-Night-Stands' either. I think that this time with Charlie has shown me that what I really want is permanency. I don't like the thought of winding up like mother, so I need to be sure that the man I pick will not run out on me. What can I do? I need to know if I'll be able to count on him. How can I find out?>

Her smile morphed into one of a mischievous nature. <What if I give him the same treatment that the twins gave him? How far can I push him; do I really ***want*** to push him? What if he tries to take advantage of me? Can I handle him? He's awfully big and ***strong***! The way he pulled me up when I slipped off that rope, whew, who would have thought?>

<My bet is that he'll be a gentleman because I think he's after more than a fling.> Her expression changed to one of excitement. <I know what I'm going to do. Since we have a few hours, why don't I use some of that time to sun bathe? Let's see what I have to wear. I packed a few swim suits. There is this one piece that I had on. It has a low cut back. And I have these. Let's see.>

Lois proceeded to lay out the swim suits she had brought along. Fortunately one of the improvements that they had made to the Ubuntu during the re-fit was to add some amenities not normally found on a fishing vessel. Some additional cabinets one of which had a 10 inch by 12 inch mirror had been installed in Lois' cabin for her cosmetics and such and a full length mirror so that she could check her appearance. She had been using the full length mirror in herself dialogue, and now she used it to full advantage.

Now that she had decided what she was going to do, she removed her shorts and top. Deciding that she really needed to

put on the suits to do a proper evaluation she also removed her bra and panties. She had been wearing the Speedo previously and putting it back on she looked at herself in it very critically, turning around to see it from all sides before deciding that it wasn't quite right. It didn't give the right effect. <No, I don't think so. This is not the right suit. Besides he's already seen me in it.> Next she changed into her brown two piece. This one had metal rings which joined the bottoms at both sides and the top in front between her breasts. All things considered, it was a rather modest swim suit, and she knew that it showed off her figure to good advantage, but it still wouldn't convey the right message.

Since she had been gone so long, Charlie was growing concerned, so he took a quick furtive glance through the boat to Lois' cabin to see how she was doing and quickly shut down his vision when he saw her in a brown bikini in front of the mirror. Oh he was in trouble. His resistance was crumbling.

She looked at another two piece suit but could tell that it wouldn't do either. There were two more to go. If neither of them would do, it would have to be the brown two piece suit. The next one was a white two piece with string bikini bottoms but a somewhat more substantial top. That was the closest to what she was looking for so far. When her gaze finally rested on the last suit, she just knew that this was the one.

Lois removed the brown suit and picked up the last one and held it up to evaluate it.

Putting on the last one she looked at herself critically in the mirror, and she was very well satisfied. <This is the suit that should make him or at least some part of him stand up and take notice.> With a very satisfied smile on her face, she picked up her sun tan lotion and an over-sized towel. <This is it. Just what the doctor ordered. Watch out, Charlie, here I come.>

Chapter 16 — Lois' Sun Bath

May 9, 1992

When Lois appeared on deck again, she was wearing a hot pink string bikini and carrying the oversized towel. Spreading the towel on the roof of the cabin right in front of Charlie, she lay down to sun bathe. Making sure that she was ***directly*** in front of Charlie and that he had an unobstructed view was her objective.

When Lois had first emerged from the cabin, she was holding the towel in such a way that all Charlie could really see were bare shoulders and legs. But when she moved to climb on top of the cabin and he saw for the first time exactly what she was wearing, he couldn't take his eyes off of her. She was gorgeous! He could feel his heart racing. Her body was perfection! His breath was coming in ragged gasps. The way she moved! The way her breasts moved inside the small confines of her top! He could feel his manhood starting to harden. The lithe grace. He could feel himself starting to sweat. He had been in a similar state with Colette at lunch that day, but this was more so, this was Lois, ***his*** Lois.

Lois could almost literally feel his eyes on her the entire time, right from the point when she came out of the cabin. She liked having him look at her. It made her feel really beautiful and ***very*** sexy with him looking at her like that. A quick glance out of the side of her eyes told her that he couldn't keep his eyes off of her. The very obvious bulge in his jeans was a testament to the effect she was having on him and was quite gratifying. To know that she could do that to him reinforced her femininity and sexuality very strongly.

Charlie was having a hard time believing the messages his eyes were sending to his brain. It was too good to be true. <Oh ... My ... God, she's going to lay down right in front of me!> He could feel his body's unbidden response and was wondering how he would be able to get through this. <Hold it together Kent! She has to be teasing me. It reminds me of what Suzanne and Colette

were doing. Is she trying to seduce me? That's not something that Lois would do. But if she is, I'm willing, but is she testing me? Do I make a play for her or not? No, play it straight. You're interested, but you want more than a fling.>

After spreading out the towel, she sat on it and applied her sun tan lotion to her arms, legs, face and torso before she lay down. After about half an hour she felt that she needed to turn over. Under that equatorial sun she was rare and didn't want to become well done. She called to him "Charlie, I want to turn over and get some sun on my back. Would you be a dear and apply my lotion to my back for me?"

"I'll be right there!" Tying off the wheel he eagerly moved to comply, but when he actually moved to the roof of the cabin and knelt beside her to perform this task, he became aware of some trepidation. When he knelt beside her, she handed him the bottle of lotion and then reached back and untied the strings holding her top in place.

That simple action made Charlie freeze. Just the thought that if she moved, she would be exposed almost drove him over the edge. When she finally spoke, he snapped out of his daze, "Well, Charlie, aren't you going to put the lotion on me?"

"Yeah, yes, yes of course." Charlie finally stammered, his thoughts snapping back to what he was supposed to be doing. He uncapped the bottle and poured some of the lotion on his hands. Right then what he was about to do really hit him. He was about to have the most intimate contact with Lois of their entire relationship. He was about to have his hands all over her nearly naked body. All he could do was look at his hands and contemplate the possible consequences of what was about to transpire. There were so many possible outcomes his hands started to shake.

Lois, oblivious to his dilemma, simply said, "Charlie? The lotion?"

Snapping out of his reverie, he moved his hands to her back. When he started to spread the lotion on her back, he was startled by the strength of the tingle that he felt every time his skin touched hers. It was so strong that it felt like it was traveling up his arms.

When she had asked him to apply the lotion, she was testing him some more. At the very first contact she felt that familiar tingle, but it was so much stronger she was startled and almost sat up. Just the thought of doing that with her top undone sent a blush to her face.

Charlie knew the significance of that tingle and reveled in the feel of it. Even beyond that though there was the feel of her skin, and he marveled at the feel. <Her skin is so silky smooth, so soft to the touch ... I love the feel of it. I could do this forever.> His hands moved very slowly as he spread the lotion. His Lois, his hands were on ***her*** skin.

Once she got used to that tingling, she realized that as Charlie was applying the lotion, she could almost feel the reverence in his touch. It was like with his touch he was worshiping her, and it made her feel ***very*** special.

Thinking about how it would feel to have her hands on him, he got a silly grin on his face.

Charlie made sure that all of the exposed skin of her back and legs had been covered with her lotion. Before he proceeded any further, he asked her if she wanted him to do her hips and bottom.

Startled Lois agreed easily. "Sure, I need all my skin protected." He proceeded to apply lotion to the rest of her body and loved stroking her legs. When he was doing her legs, his long strokes from her ankles to the top of her thighs were very sensual, and when his fingers came in contact with the sensitive inner thigh area just below her bottom, her body responded to his touch instinctually by moving her legs apart. She felt an immediate surge of desire and actually wished for more contact. A very low moan started in the back of her throat unbidden.

With his superhearing he heard her heart rate kick up sharply as she released a very low moan with this contact, almost like a kitten's purr. Only someone with his superhearing could have perceived it. His super sense of smell also picked up a spicy tang in the air. His hands went to the exposed portions of her hips and bottom, and he started stroking those areas to apply the lotion. As he was doing this, her hips started moving and she started to moan even louder. His hands returned to the sensitive inner area of her thighs. Unconsciously her legs spread even further in invitation.

Lois' breathing was getting heavier as her moans increased which nearly undid his resolve to keep this fraternal. He realized that he was treading a very thin line. This was coming awfully close to a petting session, and he was unsure of how she would respond. Thinking that the best course was to try to cool things off, he moved his hands to her back and shoulders. Truth be told he had found himself responding to her arousal, and if he hadn't cooled himself off as well as her, he might just have done something that he would have regretted later.

Again his hands moved down to her ankles and feet. As he massaged her feet, again he heard her moan in pleasure; this time he had to give himself a stern talking to. <Keep it cool! Don't blow it now! You want a lasting relationship with this woman. If you go too fast, you could scare her off. She likes what you are doing. She is deriving a lot of pleasure from your ministrations. Leave it there. Give her all the pleasure she can take. Yours will come later. Just enjoy giving her pleasure. Right now this is all about her.>

Disappointed when he was finally finished with this task because he had been enjoying the feel of her so much, Charlie reluctantly stood up. As he wiped his hands off he admired his handiwork, her lotion slick body, and hoped that this wouldn't be the only time that she would do this.

When he had been massaging her hips, bottom, and upper thighs, she had to fight off the intense desire to roll over, top or no top, and pull him down on top of her. She was so aroused that she almost felt like ripping his clothes off of him and ravishing him on the spot. But then suddenly Charlie had finished his chore and had removed his hands from her body. Her disappointment was almost tangible.

Lois quickly came to a decision. <I'm ***definitely*** doing this as often as I can. I can't believe how his touch makes me feel. It's almost like what love would feel like if that feeling was tangible. I love the feel of his hands on my skin. Even if the only reason is to have his hands on me this way, I'm going to do this every day. I love it, and most importantly, he is ***not*** trying to take advantage. This is the first time I have even tried to tempt him, and he has shown me that he is a gentleman. All this time that we've been together, we've done a lot of talking and a little cuddling, but he hasn't tried to push me into anything that I wasn't ready for. He actually has been letting me set the pace. I'm pretty well convinced that he doesn't just want a fling, he wants something more permanent, but am I ready for that? Well, I just may be.>

<Did I really think that? After what has happened to me in the past, all the failed relationships, the barriers that I erected to prevent just this kind of thing. To even be thinking this way. How did I get to this point? What happened to those barriers? It's like he has undermined them until they have collapsed of their own weight like the walls of Jericho. He is now storming the city, my heart. In the biblical story the city was laid waste, is he going to do that to my heart? If I offer it up, will he trample it underfoot? No, I'm certain that he would not. He is too honorable to do anything like that to me.>

Even with the suntan lotion, it wasn't too long under that equatorial sun until Lois began to pink up, so reluctantly she started to retire to her cabin to get dressed. As she was passing

Charlie on her way to the cabin, she heard him sigh, so she changed course and walked over to him. He was standing at the wheel as she reached up with her free hand and placed it behind his head, laced her fingers through his hair, and pulled his face down to hers for a kiss. After a time apparently out of the blue, she released him and said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome. But for what? Applying the lotion? It was ***my*** pleasure!"

She replied, "I ***know*** it was. It was for ***me*** too. I was thanking you for being just the person I thought you were."

"Huh?"

She looked him straight in the eyes and said, "Charlie, you're a gentleman and not one who is going to take advantage of me. I had a bet with myself that you ***would*** be, and I'm very happy that I won."

Linda reappeared on deck after a short time in jeans and a top with a book in hand. She pulled one of the deck chairs over near the wheel so that she could be closer to Charlie, sat down, and began to read. She said, "I hope you don't mind if I read for a bit."

Charlie got a glimpse of the title and quipped, "Romance novels?"

"Don't tell anyone else, okay. It'll be just our secret. Someday I hope to write one of my own; in fact I've started it, I just haven't gotten very far."

"I would think that 'adventure' would be more up your alley." Charlie remarked casually. As soon as he said it, he knew it was a mistake. The look on her face confirmed his mistake. He tried to cover up, "I mean, you lead such an exciting life as an investigative reporter that's more in the lines of adventure."

The attempt at cover-up hadn't worked. It had only dug the hole he was in deeper. She was fuming, "Are you saying that I can't write a romance novel because I have no experience in romance?"

"No, by no means! I'm just saying that you should write about the things you know." That last word was barely out of his mouth when he realized that he had made things much worse. "Ooops, that didn't come out exactly the way I meant it."

With barely controlled anger in her voice, she said, "Just ***how*** did you mean it?"

By this time he was desperate to get back in her good graces. He tried again. "I meant that I'm sure that you could write a fantastic story whether it is romance novel or any other type of novel. I think you would be equally good at writing an adventure novel because you lead such an exciting life. Just look at what we are doing now; if you wrote this up as a novel, I'd read it."

This had the ring of sincerity to it, and thinking about the sun bathing session she had just had and how much pleasure he had given her, she decided forgive him.

Later that first day it was just under three hours until they sighted the flotilla in front of them, and they maintained their speed as they cruised past. After another fifty kilometers upstream they anchored again. Charlie expected the flotilla to reach their vicinity sometime around 5:00 PM, and he planned to follow and see where they anchored for the night. Charlie prepared their dinner which they took up on deck to eat. Right on schedule as they were eating, the flotilla passed them and continued on its way. Charlie allowed them to get out of sight before upping anchor to follow. This time they proceeded at about 10 knots. When they next spotted the riverboats, it was about 6:00 PM, and they were already anchored in the middle of the stream and tied up bulwark to bulwark.

Charlie calculated that they had covered about one hundred seventy kilometers in one day. At that pace it would take about a week to reach the pier north of Dongou. They passed them and continued some kilometers upriver before they in turn anchored for the night. Charlie estimated that they would have at least a

couple of hours after they got up before the flotilla would pass them again. If they got under way early enough, they might stay ahead of them most of the day, but at some point they would need to anchor for a while to allow them to pass again.

The next morning, Charlie woke to a sound on the roof of the Unbutu's cabin. Were guerillas storming the boat? No, the sound was too soft. Not moving so as to remain quiet, Charlie used his x-ray vision through the ceiling of his cabin and almost had a heart attack right then. His vision revealed Lois wearing a brown bikini doing Tai Chi Chuan as the sun rose over the river. Slapping his hands over his eyes like a small boy, he shut down his eyesight. The last image in his brain was Lois performing the twenty-four move simplified Beijing 'new style'. The slow motion martial arts moves being practiced while she wore the bikini were extremely enticing and tantalizing. He muttered, "I'm dead on this trip. I don't think I'll be able to hold out. I'm dead, dead, dead. Between this and that sun bath yesterday ..." <Well, now at least I know how she stays so limber and fit.>

Later that day Linda made Charlie very happy that he had stood by his principles. Since he had, he had lived up to her expectations. As a side benefit he was **very** happy to find that there was a repeat of the sunbath, and it was repeated every day of their voyage. Charlie started tying off the wheel and lying with her for a while after applying the lotion when conditions allowed.

Lois decided that turnabout was fair play, and the next time since she knew that he would be laying there beside her for a while, she insisted on applying lotion to his exposed arms and face before he worked on her back. They would spend the time talking and enjoying being together. He never seemed to run out of stories about his travels and the people he had met during them.

Charlie took it upon himself to re-tie her top for her when it was time for her to go change. The first time he did this, she rolled over on her side facing him and give him a thank you kiss. The second time she pushed him down on his back and half laid on top of him for this kiss with her barely covered breasts in intimate contact with his chest as she did. It was exciting even with his shirt on. Needless to say, Charlie liked the way things were working out.

They were blessed with bright sunny days and no rain for the duration of the voyage, so over the course of the next week they managed to follow the flotilla. Sometimes in front of them and then stopping to allow them to pass before following again. Sometimes as the flotilla came past Charlie and Lois would be playing together in the river. Sometimes they would be sun bathing on the roof of the cabin. They simply appeared to be a young couple on holiday. The seeming innocence of the couple prevented any suspicion being raised in the minds of those in charge of the shipment. Thus, this process was followed with some variations for the next week.

May 16, 1992

When they finally arrived in the vicinity of Dongou, they anchored in the river just outside of the marina. Charlie hauled in on the painter and pulled the dingy up alongside, then he helped Lois into the dingy. She reclined in the stern, trailing a hand lazily in the water while he sat amidships and mounted the oars. While relaxed in the stern, she directed Charlie as he pulled on the oars. When they pulled up to a float in the marina, Charlie held on while Lois climbed onto the float and tied off a line to a cleat so that the dingy wouldn't float away. They went to the office of the owner of the marina to arrange for renting a slip. He started speaking with him in French, but quickly realized when the owner developed a rather sullen expression that that wasn't his first language, so he switched to Swahili. The owner brightened up considerably with this because Swahili and Bantu

are very closely related languages. While renting the slip, Charlie also inquired about hiring someone to watch the Ubuntu at night. The owner of the marina said, "My brother-in-law would be willing to watch the boat for a 'modest' fee."

Charlie asked, "How modest a fee?"

His reply was, "A thousand Francs a night."

Charlie said, "That is a shame. I was only going to offer two hundred."

"But he couldn't do it for less than seven hundred and fifty."

"I might have come up to three hundred."

"He might consider five hundred."

"I think five hundred would be acceptable. I will guarantee two weeks, and he can start tomorrow night." Charlie reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. He counted out the appropriate number of franc notes and then added one more. "Here is his fee in advance for two weeks and five hundred francs for your trouble. If we are longer than two weeks, we'll pay the balance when we return."

With a very happy grin on his face the marina owner rolled up the bills and placing them in his pocket said, "You can count on my brother-in-law. It's a pleasure doing business with you."

Before Lois and Charlie returned in the dingy to the Ubuntu, they went to one of the local eateries and had a meal. This gave Charlie a break from cooking and gave them more time to talk without the distraction of working at meal preparation.

Lois, for a change, had been telling one of her tales of getting and important story. Wrapped in her tale, she at first didn't notice Charlie's expression as he looked across the table. When she really looked at him, she realized the best description of his expression was 'besotted'. She realized, <So he really does enjoy my company, like me, or dare I think, love me. This could be a good relationship.>

After their meal they returned to the Ubuntu, and weighing the anchor pulled her into the slip and put out the spring lines and bumpers.

They still spent the night on board. Before retiring to their respective cabins they spent some time cuddling. Clark noticed Lois was wearing her wedding band. She really didn't need to when they were alone. Hope sprung in his heart at that small gesture.

Chapter 17 — Time to Start Hiking

May 16, 1992

It was time to start hiking. Making up a couple of backpacks with their necessities, Charlie insisted on carrying most of the extra equipment. Altogether they were going to have to carry the supplies necessary for a two week hike covering about two hundred kilometers round trip through the jungle.

Charlie had purchased a backpacker's two person nylon dome tent and two sleeping bags with ground mats. To this was added canteens and dehydrated foods and backpacker's stove. By the time they finished packing, Lois' backpack was little larger than a daypack with her clothes, some food, and her sleeping bag while Charlie's looked like something a strong man would have trouble with. He had the balance of the food, his sleeping bag, the tent and stove, and other supplies as well as his clothes. He also carried a machete. Neither of them carried any firearms.

"Before we set out, let me show you on a map where the pier is located." He pulled out a map and laid it out on the table. He pointed out to her the spot where he believed they would be off loading the cargo. "The pier is located about here, which makes it about ten kilometers or six miles upstream. It's north of town, so we need to set out on foot to get into position to watch as the cargo is unloaded. Don't expect it to be easy going. The ten kilometers that we need to cover is through light jungle growth. We will have to make our own path, and this can take time. We will need to exercise additional caution as we get nearer to the

pier since we can't afford to make much noise."

"What kind of growth do you expect we will encounter?"

"There should be a lot of ferns and short undergrowth, taller trees, some palms a lot of hanging vines. Be careful, some of those hanging vines might just be alive."

"What do you mean by that? Most vines are alive, aren't they?"

"I should have said that not all the vines are vegetable in nature. Something that looks like a hanging vine could be a boa constrictor or one of his cousins."

"Oh great, hanging vines and hanging snakes. Does it get any worse?"

"No, that's about as bad as it gets as long as you don't count the insects."

"Okay, give me the bad news. What is it with the insects?"

"Well, if you see what looks like a brown or red carpet and it looks kinda like it's moving, get out of the way. It could be army ants. They devour any living matter in their path, plant or animal. That carpet is usually several million ants."

"Ugh, that gives me the shivers just thinking about it."

"Oh, it gets better. There are millipedes and centipedes that have poisonous stings."

"Do we really want to do this?"

Laughing Charlie replied, "Those are really kinda rare. I don't think we need to worry too much about any of those. The main problem would be at night, and we should be safely zipped up in the tent."

"Okay, as long as you're sure. I'll trust you to keep me safe."

When they left in the morning, they secured the Ubuntu so that it wouldn't be taken.

They shouldered their packs and headed out. Just as Charlie had predicted, it wasn't easy going. Even with as difficult as it was, they both noticed that the farther they got from town the noisier the jungle itself became. Eventually they could hear seemingly hundreds of species of birds calling each other.

Lois said in a hushed tone, "Listen to all the racket. I'm afraid to talk too loud because I might scare them, but if I don't raise my voice, you won't hear me. These birds are incredible!"

There was also an increasing amount of sounds, similar to the bird calls yet somehow quite different.

"Look up there. See that? That's a monkey swinging along. There's another! Hear them? They're talking to one another."

There were several species of monkeys swinging around in the trees above their heads. When they finally arrived in the vicinity of the pier, they found that the river boats had managed to dock and that they were unloading the first boat as they got into position. They watched for a while to try to get an idea as to how long it would take them to finish. Charlie said, "Okay, it looks to me like they will take another hour at least to finish unloading. They'll probably set out immediately. If we are to get ahead of them, we should start now." He pointed in a North Westerly direction. "Let's head off in that direction."

After making a meal of granola bars and water, they headed out so that they would be ahead of the cargo as the bearers brought it up the trail. From their observation post they cut diagonally through the jungle until they reached the main trail out of sight of the pier. The cargo bearers made up a rather large party. The cases were slung under poles which, depending on the weight of the case, had either four or six bearers per pole. Even so it would be slow going for them.

Names or IDs of some of the rebels responsible for the receipt of the arms were their objective. In order to get these they decided that they would need to shadow the shipment until they could get pictures as well as names. Considering that the crates were quite heavy they determined that the bearers would only be able to make ten kilometers or less a day. That would mean at least ten days in transit.

Accordingly before the last of the crates was unloaded, they had started their trek. In that way they would be ahead of the cargo train. In order to make time they decided to stay mostly on the trail since that would be easier than trying to hack their way through the jungle growth. The trail was of hard packed earth and there had been no rain in the last week, so they weren't too worried about leaving tracks. Tracks could alert the rebels to their presence. The pace they were able to maintain was greater than that which could be equaled by the bearers and were several kilometers ahead of them when they stopped for the night.

When it was still over an hour before sundown Charlie said, "Let's stop for the night. Take the next trail you come to on the right. We'll go about five hundred meters and then leave the trail." With Lois leading the way they took one of the side trails for about half a kilometer and then moved off the trail a hundred meters and set up camp in a small clearing conveniently close to a small stream.

Charlie was setting up the tent, and they would lay out their sleeping mats and bags once it was up. Charlie had already explained to Lois the importance of using the tent rather than sleeping 'under the stars' when he had been teasing her about the critters. He reemphasized the need for that protection since first there were disease-bearing mosquitoes that the tent would keep out. Secondly there were other biting and stinging insects that with their sting could possibly kill. Thirdly and most importantly he again emphasized the problem of constrictor snakes which could grow to gigantic.

After the camp was partially set up Linda said, "Would you mind if I did some kata? It's been a couple of weeks, and I don't want my Tae Kwon Do to get too rusty. You never can tell, we might run into a situation where I might need to use it."

She kicked off her shoes and did some stretches while Charlie looked on interestedly. When she had finished stretching she took up a relaxed ready stance and commenced the movements of the kata. When she had finished a couple Charlie asked, "Could you teach me some of those moves? I was taught some things by a Vietnam vet, but I haven't had any, what you would call, formal training."

"Sure, I can do that, but it would be best if after we get back, you take a regular class. Okay, here are some of the basic moves ... " She started with basic blocks and strikes. She could see by how readily he picked up the moves just how much he had been taught and adjusted what she showed him accordingly.

After about half an hour she said, "I must say, you were telling the truth when you said you had picked up a few things along the way. Based on what I have seen here you would be on your way to a blue belt easily. We just need to refine your technique, and you need to master some kata. Here, let me go through a simple one."

Automatically she assumed the tone and stance of an instructor and said, "Kata are forms that mimic actual situations. This one is designed for a situation where someone is coming at you with a weapon using a downward stroke trying to hit you in the head." She moved through the routine. "Now you try it." Charlie stepped through the kata with her correcting technique as he went through, but not very much correction was needed. He was good, and she was impressed. After a couple of runs through, they went through it together facing one another. When they finished she said, "You'll do! That was very well done! I think we could do a little each night. It would be good for me to be your Sensei, and it won't hurt for you to learn. Teaching you will stretch me. Based on what I've seen, it won't take long for you to be able to test for a belt." With a very satisfied tone in her voice she said, "By the time we are back in the states you should be ready to test."

When they had finished up, he cautioned her to be very careful any time she was going to be out of sight to let him know

where she was going to be so that if he was needed, she could call, and he wouldn't be delayed by a search. While he was finishing setting up the camp, Lois took a collapsible shovel and some tissue and after telling Charlie what direction she was headed went into the brush to take care of some personal business.

When she returned, she found Charlie out in front of the tent washing up to get the grime of the trail off. He had an improvised basin sitting on top of his backpack, which was standing on end in front of the tent. She emitted a soft gasp and dropped the shovel as she saw him. For a moment in time, all she could do was stand there and stare.

Lois thought, <Wow! This is unexpected. What a sight to greet me when I get back to camp! I have to admit that I **like** what I see!> Just as a moth is drawn to the flame, Lois was irresistibly drawn across the clearing to Charlie.

Charlie had heard her gasp and the sound of the shovel as it hit the ground when she saw him and had heard her heartbeat speed up. Not knowing the cause or what she was going to do, he continued with his ablutions.

Lois walked almost as one in a trance as she approached him. When she arrived, she gently placed her hands on his shoulders and started running them down and around, all over his back. She asked, "Charlie, do you mind?"

When he felt her hands on him, he stopped moving and gave her some time to explore his back. As soon as he felt her touch, he could feel that familiar tingle, but it was much more intense. It felt like her hands were leaving trails of liquid fire on his skin wherever they touched him. He replied, "No, not at all. I like it."

"That's good because I want to feel all of you. Wow, soooo strong. You must work out a lot."

As soon as her hands touched his back, she could feel her hands tingling so strongly it felt like the sensation was extending up her arms. Her eyes were closed as she gave herself over to the sensations of her hands on his body. <Is this what Charlie felt when he was applying the lotion to my body? I hope he loved the feel of my body as much as I'm loving the feel of his. When I was applying the lotion to his face and arms, it wasn't quite as intense as this.> "Charlie, do you feel that tingle? I feel it whenever we touch. Do you like it as much as I do?"

In a low, husky voice, Charlie replied, "Yes, I do."

"Did you feel it when you were putting my lotion on me? Was it this strong for you? I know that what I felt was very strong."

"Yes, I felt it very strongly. I liked it very much. That was only one of the reasons I liked putting your lotion on you."

Her hands seemingly of their own volition moved over his back until she had thoroughly explored every square inch, and then he turned around. When he did, she opened her eyes to take in the view and then her hands were exploring all of the peaks, valleys, ridges and ripples as they moved slowly over his pecs, chest and six-pack abs, and as they did, she got a very dreamy, almost mesmerized, expression on her face as she watched her hands move on him.

Her hands moved up again to his shoulders. "Ohhhh, Charlie." Her hands continued up and around his neck to the back of his head, and then she buried her fingers in his hair and slowly pulled his head down for a kiss. This kiss was second in intensity only to **the** kiss at Pointe Noir. It started off gently but quickly escalated to soul shattering proportions where all conscious thought ceased for a time. When they came up for air, they were both panting and flushed. Charlie pulled her into his arms and simply held her for a while planting light kisses on the side of her face and neck until both of their heart rates had returned to some semblance of normalcy.

Slowly the bird calls were dying with the fading light, and the monkeys as well were seeking their nightly refuge, so the jungle

was becoming more and more quiet with the passage of the sun.

Finally Charlie cleared his throat and said softly, "We should get something to eat. Preferably something hot to ... ah ... keep up our energy." With great gentleness and also great reluctance, he gently pulled Lois' arms away from his neck. Seeing the distressed but resigned look on her face, he squeezed her hands in comfort and a promise.

As they listened to the fading jungle chorus, they made a meal of reconstituted beef stew from their hiker's rations. Lois was convinced that she was eating some kind of meat that she didn't recognize. She didn't really think it was the beef that was advertised. It was rather tasteless and non-descript, but it was filling. Chuckling she said "They should have called this Mystery Meat Stew. I'm not so sure that it's really beef."

After they cleaned up, they retired to the tent. "The next few days will probably be just like this one. We will stay on the trail and ahead of the pack train. How are you handling the walk? How are your feet? No blisters I hope."

"No, I'm doing okay. No blisters, these hiking boots are old friends. We've gone many miles together."

They settled in and composed themselves for sleep. After all that had been happening today and most recently the memory of her hands on his body and that kiss, it was a while before she fell asleep.

Lois was standing in their tent. She had removed her shirt and shorts so that she could do a wash-up using a basin of water. It had been a really hot day, and it felt good to be out of the heavy clothes and to feel the cool, well relatively cool anyhow, water as she ran the wash cloth over her body. She had finished washing her arms and face and was proceeding with her abdomen when Charlie walked in unexpectedly. Even though she was in her bra and panties, she was not embarrassed after all they covered more than her bikini. She sensed more than saw him enter and said to him over her shoulder, "Would you scrub my back?"

Charlie stepped up in back of her, and she handed him the cloth over her shoulder. He started up high at the back of her neck. In a daring move as he did, she reached around behind and unhooked her bra and removed it as she said, "Let me get this out of the way." Her voice was low and had a sultry tone.

As he proceeded to wash her back, one of his hands stole around and he laid it across her abdomen. She felt him kissing the back of her neck, softly, slowly. She took his hand in hers and slowly moved it up until it cupped her right breast. He then moved his hand to the other breast to give it equal attention. As he was touching her she leaned her head back into his chest and emitted a low moan. When he moved his hand, she had twisted her head around so that her lips were presented to him for a kiss.

She then turned completely around and unbuttoned his shirt. Sliding her hands under the shirt she moved them up over his pecs to his shoulders and then pushed the shirt down his arms. She then moved in so that her bare breasts were very pleasantly crushed against his naked chest, skin to skin. He reclaimed her lips in a soul wrenching kiss which escalated as his tongue sought, and she allowed entry to her mouth. Their tongues performed a gentle and quiet dance, each tasting the other.

She took his hand and led him over to her sleeping bag where she laid down and pulled him down beside her. His mouth left hers, and she felt abandoned until she felt his lips on the side of her neck then he left a trail of kisses down to her collar bone and further onto her collar bone.

As he had been doing all of this, she was becoming more and more excited. Her lower back muscles had been clenching rhythmically and a heat had been growing in her.

"Make love to me Charlie, please!" she said in a husky voice. "I want more. I want you."

This started a period of intimacy.

Suddenly Lois woke up with a start and a gasp. She sat up in her sleeping bag and looked over at Charlie. Apparently he was sleeping peacefully. She just sat there watching him for a few minutes while her heart rate and breathing slowed.

<Where did that dream come from? Wow! Could it be because of what happened earlier today? I walked into the clearing, and he had his shirt off. He was washing off from the morning's exertions. Dressed just in his shorts, he was a sight to behold. The muscles and sinews moving like snakes under that perfect skin of his back. Those well defined chest and abs. That sense of barely controlled power in those rippling muscles. When I saw him that way, I was shaken, and I just had to put my hands on him. I couldn't stop myself. I don't think I would have even if I could have. Why? I've seen him before, touched him before, but this was different; I just ***had*** to get my hands on him.>

Lois was surprised to think, <I guess I'm now looking at him as a possible lover. There's just something about him that's disturbing in an exciting way. I can't exactly put a finger on it, but he affects me in a way that no one else ever has. All that power, that strength, yet when he puts his hands on me, there is an infinite gentleness. It's almost like he's afraid that if he wasn't careful, he would break me like a porcelain doll. And yet, it's not just that. There's almost a reverence in his touch. When he was applying my sun tan lotion, I could feel it. He makes me feel ***so*** ... ***special***. I have a hard time understanding why, but he does. I have to admit I'm strongly attracted to him and it feels good. It also feels ***right*** somehow. I'm going to have to let things happen and just see what occurs naturally.>

Lois didn't know it but the acceleration of her heartbeat and breathing had awakened Charlie. Initially he didn't know if she was having a dream or a nightmare. He had considered awakening her, but when she started to moan in apparent pleasure, he knew that it was in fact a pleasant dream, and he had been loath to disturb her. When he heard her calling his name, he smiled to himself, but he quickly replaced that smile with a neutral expression as he pretended to be asleep. After she woke up he thought, <She doesn't know I was listening. I can't tell her what I heard. It would probably embarrass her. She obviously was having a pleasant dream; that was sure no nightmare. She was moaning out loud as if she were having an orgasm and then calling my name and almost shouting that she loved me. I'm pleased that she is thinking about me that way.> He had to fight to keep that smile off his face as he pretended to be asleep so that her possible embarrassment would be lessened.

With the return of daylight, the jungle chorus was slowly returning and provided a backdrop to their thoughts as they prepared for the day. Charlie was remembering what he had heard when Lois was dreaming and how she had been calling his name. He noticed that Lois was watching him, and she had a different expression on her face while she did. If he had had to classify it, he would have to have said that it was one of anticipation or speculation. He had a good idea as to the cause — that same dream. <I wonder if she'll ever tell me about that dream. I wonder exactly how far we went in that fantasy. I hope that at some time she will feel that she can tell me, but that probably won't happen until our relationship has moved beyond where it currently is. Realistically she might not tell me until our relationship has gotten to the same point that we reached in the dream.>

While Charlie was finishing up repacking his backpack, he outlined the plan for the day.

"We don't know what time they're starting. As we approach the main trail, we need to keep an ear out. The bearers will probably be singing as they go. Like the military when it marches, it helps to pass the time, but it also helps them to keep the cadence. If they get out of step, it could cause the crates to start swinging uncontrollably."

"So once we are on the trail if we start to hear them, we need to pick up the pace?"

"That's right. Actually I can't tell just how far ahead or behind we would need to be. If this was a normal military patrol, they would have advance scouts or an advanced guard. They would also have a trailing element. I just don't know how worried they are about their security since we're basically on their home turf."

"I'd rather be on the safe side. Let's stay as far ahead as we can. If I start to hear them, I'll start moving faster, but what about you? Are you going to be able to move fast enough with that load you're carrying? I don't think, no, that's not correct, I know I couldn't handle that huge pack."

"I can handle it okay. Don't worry about me. I do want you slightly in front of me though. The trail should be easy enough to follow, but if one of their lead elements were to start catching up with us, I want to be between you and them. I could delay them until you can get away."

Lois with a very determined look replied, "Nothing doing. Okay, I'll walk in front, but if you think I'm going to abandon you, you had better think again." She held up her left hand so that he could not help seeing the wedding band that she refused to remove, then she brought up her right hand and folded it over her left and pulled her clasped hands in until they were touching her breast. She surprised herself with the emotion in her voice as she finished, "We're in this together, and we're going to stay together. If one of us gets caught, we both get caught, then we can escape together."

Charlie was startled at her strong response and was starting to feel more than a little frustrated. His main objective was to keep her free. He knew that he would be able to get away if he detected the slightest lack of vigilance on their captors part if it came to that. He didn't want to have to worry about her being injured.

He tried another tack, "How about this, if I get caught and you don't, you could shadow us and help me get free."

"Nope, it won't wash. If we're caught, we're caught together, then we work at getting us both free."

With an exasperated sigh he gave in, "Okay, but let's try to ***not*** get caught. That is infinitely preferable to escaping afterward."

Lois, seeing that he was ready to shoulder his pack, moved around in back to help lift it into place. Once this was done, she moved around in front of him and gave him a kiss. "Okay handsome, let's go." She turned and started retracing her steps back the way they had come the previous night. Because she had turned her back, she didn't see the sloppy grin that split his face after that kiss and comment.

When they hit the main trail, they could faintly hear the bearers singing, so they set off at a rapid pace to get some more distance between them and the cargo train.

Chapter 18 — Captured

May 22, 1992

After nearly a week on the trail, the sounds of the normal jungle chorus had become a comforting familiar background to the day. However, the sounds of the jungle chorus were not as pronounced this morning. As awareness slowly returned and sleep became a thing of the past, they looked at each other across the by now oh so familiar tent. Slowly the realization of the cause of the change impinged on their awareness. The jungle sounds were being muted primarily by the sounds of the rain which was falling onto the tent.

Still feeling somewhat self-conscious as she sat up Lois clutched her sleeping bag to her breast. Charlie sat up also and they looked at each other. Each had a somewhat disgusted look on their face. Lois was the first to voice her discontent. "How

dare it rain! Things have been just fine until now. We were almost finished with this.”

“I take it you don’t feel like hiking in the rain.”

“You take it right. It’s bad enough lugging that pack around when it’s hot and humid but in the rain! I don’t think so.”

“Okay, it’s just as well. Because of this rain we’ll have to let them pass us. If we didn’t then we’d be leaving prints on the trail, and they would know we were there. Hungry?”

“Yeah, but make it something that we don’t have to go outside to prepare or eat.”

Charlie rummaged around in his pack and came up with some granola bars. “Honey nut or chocolate almond? As if I really need to ask.” He was laughing as he was saying this, and he extended the chocolate almond bar out for her to grab. Which she did smiling her thanks as she did so.

“You know me pretty well, don’t you?”

“I’m learning all the time.”

They munched on their granola bars for a couple of minutes in silence then Lois asked a question, “Charlie, do you like me?”

Somewhat taken aback by this question Charlie answered, “Lois, you don’t know how much.”

With a raised eyebrow and her wicked little grin evident she asked, “Are you attracted to me sexually?”

Embarrassed now he stammered, “Well, yeah, uh, yes, uh, yes, yes I am. Wh ... why do you ask?”

“I thought you were. Why are you embarrassed about it? Why do you try to hide it from me?”

Still more than a little bit embarrassed he responded, “I, uh, well, ah, it,” He cleared his throat and started again, “uh it would have ah added a ah an unnecessary level uh level of complexity to, to our relationship uh right now. We are here on a job, and ... and we need to see it finished.”

Enjoying his embarrassment more than a little bit she continued, “I know we’re here on a job and we’re nearly finished with it, so why don’t you tell me how you feel?”

A look of resolution came over his face as he said, “Lois, I’d like to, but there are some things that need to be worked out first.” <Like are you going to live or die. I’m here to make sure you live, but what if I fail? If she is going to die, is it fair to her to let her know how I feel? But if she is going to die, is it fair to her to ***not*** let her know how I feel? I don’t know which would be the right thing to do!> “Right now we both need to have clear heads without the confusion of wondering exactly where we are going in this relationship. I’ll say that I’m looking for permanence and that I hope you are too.”

“Charlie, I’ve known for some time that you’re attracted to me sexually. You haven’t been able to hide it even though you’ve tried. A long time ago I made a decision that I wasn’t going to let myself get involved in any kind of relationship again because I had been hurt so much in the past. So for the longest time my job has been my life. I’ve been hurt too many times, and I just wasn’t going to let it happen again.” This last was said with a small almost inaudible sob.

She continued with a little catch in her throat and a hint of unshed tears. “Since we’ve been together, I’ve started thinking that I made a mistake. When I made that decision, it was the safe choice. Stay safe, don’t get involved, and don’t put your heart out there for it to be trampled on again. But can anyone really live that way?” Her voice started to pick up some animation, and the pain faded into the background. “In the last couple of months with you, I’ve had a glimpse of what it could be like. This time with you has opened my eyes to what life could be like with the right person. My job doesn’t have to ***be*** my life; it can be just a ***part*** of it. Being with you, working with you, we’ve shared the responsibilities, shared ideas, and shared the non-work, personal time. I now see that that was what was really missing in my life. I wasn’t really living, I was barely existing. What I was missing

was someone to share the personal time with. We are on the job, sure, but we’ve been working ***together***, as a ***team*** not just as ***two individuals***, and I’ve been seeing just what I’ve been missing all these years by working alone. Where have you been all my life? If I had had you around, so many things would have been different. Because I’m the best, I have the respect of other reporters, but I’m starting to see that that isn’t enough. I have plenty of people that respect me but no one to love me. I have their respect, but after work I go home to an empty apartment. I order take out, work some more, and go to bed alone. The next day the cycle repeats itself. That’s not life ... its existence and a poor one at that. I don’t have anyone to share with when things aren’t going right or to celebrate with for the little victories.”

“Lois, we’re together in this, and I hope that we can stay together, but we need to get through the rest of this before we can be sure. If I didn’t know just how much this investigation meant to you, I’d suggest that we pack up and just head back right now and say ‘to hell with it’. That would be the safe way. That would be the sure way. There are still some unknowns, too many unknowns. We could die tomorrow no matter how much I try to prevent it. History seems reluctant to change sometimes. But I would be willing to cheat history or fate if you want to call it that, if it meant that you would be safe and we could be together, but could you live with that?”

With a quizzical expression she asked, “History? Fate? What do history and fate have to do with it?”

“Your history, my history, our history — somewhere it’s already been written. Good, bad, or indifferent it’s there. I can only hope that it isn’t cast in stone. I pray that it isn’t because if it is I don’t know if I’ll be able to go on.”

“Charlie, you’re scaring me.” She pushed back the top cover of the sleeping bag to reveal that all she had on was her bra and panties. She got up from her bag and moved over to Charlie’s bag. He raised the flap so that she could join him inside and she lay down next to him. “Hold me, Charlie. I just want you to hold me for a while. I’m not suggesting anything else. Some of the things you have been saying have left me feeling unsure of how things will turn out, and I need you to hold me.”

As Charlie wrapped her up in his arms, she snuggled up to him. “Charlie, why do I feel so comfortable with you? We’ve only known each other for a couple of months, but I feel like I’ve known you forever. When I’m in your arms like this, I feel safe and secure and protected and content and ... I feel like I don’t ever want you to let me go!”

He started stroking her hair and pushed an errant strand back behind her ear. “Lois, I don’t want to let you go, and when we get past this, you’ll find out just how much. If we make it through this, I’ll explain everything, I promise.”

They drifted into silence, each occupied with their own thoughts.

The warmth of their bodies inside his sleeping bag, the comfort of the closeness, and the sound of the rain on the tent had a soporific effect, and Lois fell asleep in Charlie’s arms. A contented smile graced his features as he watched her sleep. She had been on her side as they had been talking and had rolled over on her back with her head pillowed on his right forearm when she fell asleep. He half rolled so that he could look more directly at her while she slept. <Is it right to not tell her how I feel? How much harm could that do? What if something does happen, and I never told her? Could I forgive myself? I have to tell her.> In a half whisper so as not to disturb her slumber, he answered all of her questions. “Actually Lois, I more than like you, I love you with ***all*** my heart, and I long to tell you that. It may not be the right thing to do because I want both of us at our peak, so I probably shouldn’t tell you just yet. Am I attracted to you sexually, you bet. I yearn to be with you, but that too must wait. I would like nothing better than to cheat fate and just say to hell

with this investigation and take you out of here, but that would diminish you in so many ways. If I did that, it wouldn't allow you to be who and what you are, and you would hate me for it. I've got to see this through with you and do my best to protect you."

Lois shifted position again. When she finally settled, she was lying on her left side. Her right arm was across his chest, and her head was pillowed now on his right shoulder. Her right breast was pressing into his ribcage, and her right leg was across his thigh with her foot in between his legs. Looking over at her he saw that her hair had fallen across her face, so he gently reached over and brushed her hair back, tucking that ever errant strand behind her right ear and letting his hand linger, caressing the side of her face. As he did, she started mumbling in her sleep, but the only coherent word he could make out was "Charlie".

"Lois, my love, my life, I promise you, whatever it takes I'm going to do. If it means compromising my secret, then so be it. My secret is nothing compared to your safety."

After a while Lois awoke. When she did, she was staring into Charlie's dark brown eyes from a distance of about six inches. She said, "Hi."

"Hi, yourself! Lois, I've been having an argument with myself, and I think I've come to a decision. Lois, there's something I need to tell you."

"Charlie, if you feel it's best not to then don't."

"No, I have to be honest with you. Lois, I love you. I've loved you from the first moment we met. I should have told you earlier, but I was afraid of what your response would be. I'm not asking for some declaration from you; I just needed you to know that."

"Charlie, I thought that was how you felt. You didn't need to hide it from me. It does explain a few things though."

"You may not feel the same way, and I would understand if you didn't, but I had to tell you that."

"Charlie, I'm not sure yet in my own mind exactly where I am. I'm kind of confused right now, but I'll sort it out before long." She raised herself up and gave him a kiss.

By the time they finished, the rain had stopped, and they decided to pack up and move out on the trail of the weapons.

After rolling up their sleeping bags, Charlie took down the tent. They repacked everything and grabbed some more granola bars to eat while they hiked. Retracing their steps back to the main trail, they headed out. Charlie knew that they were getting near their destination and mentioned that fact to Lois.

Unknown to Charlie and Lois, a squad of rebels had been detached from the security detail to form a hunting party. The convoy was nearing their destination, and they had been detailed to bring in some fresh meat for the camp.

Charlie and Lois were still following the trail left by the bearers, making sure that they were almost out of earshot behind them. This time Charlie was in the lead since that was where the greatest danger lay. They could barely hear the bearers as they sang while carrying their loads.

They were in deep jungle by this time, and it was hard to keep on track. As a result even with his enhanced senses, they were surprised by the squad that had been dispatched as a hunting party. The hunters were returning to the trail after having been in the jungle hunting monkeys.

When they jumped out at them, Charlie shouted, "Linda, run! I'll hold them off."

Lois quickly saw that that flight would be useless since they were completely surrounded. "No good, we're going to have to fight!"

With a quick move she shed her pack and took up a defensive stance. Arms up with double sword hands prepared to strike. The rebel nearest her had his rifle slung over his shoulder. Seeing that it was just a woman in front of him, he reached for her.

That was his undoing. As he reached for her, she grabbed his

right wrist with her right hand and stepped back with her right foot and pulled, forcing him off balance. As he started to fall past her, she shifted direction and brought her right knee up into his solar plexus. With a whoosh all of the air was expelled from his lungs and he fell unconscious, the sharp blow causing his heart to skip a few beats. With this adversary down she immediately recovered to a ready stance.

Quickly shedding his pack Charlie also took up a defensive posture. He had seen that it wasn't going to be any use to try to run even as he had shouted to Lois to do just that. He was hampered by the fact that he couldn't overtly utilize his powers, and there were too many of the rebels. He did use some of the martial arts moves that he had learned from the Vietnam vet and more recently, Lois.

He had really appreciated that time with Vince, the vet. He had been just coming into his powers and learning the martial arts had taught him a measure of control he didn't think he would have had otherwise. He was able to 'pull' his punches so that they looked like those of a 'normal' man. He was holding his own and constantly checking on Lois. He was impressed that she was holding her own as well.

For Lois the next attack was not long in coming. Another rebel seeing what she had done to his friend came in but was somewhat more wary. He pulled a machete from its scabbard at his belt and used this to threaten her. When she didn't appear to back down, he came at her. Lifting the blade above his head, he prepared for a downward stroke. If it connected, it would cleave her skull in two all the way to the breastbone. As he was coming at her, she shifted her stance. She stepped into his movement, and under the arc of his arms and assuming a strong stance, she prepared to take the blow. At the last instant before contact she crossed her arms at the forearms forming a 'V'.

When the blow came, she took the impact at the 'V' of her crossed arms, and since she had stepped in under the arc of the blow, it was his forearm and not the blade that made the contact. At contact her hands spun around and grabbed his wrist and forearm. She stepped back with her left foot, shifting her balance to that foot and bringing her right leg up and parallel to the ground with her right foot cocked back. When he reached the correct position, she released the round kick. "KKKIIIEEAAAaaaaHH."

The impact felt like the ball of her foot had hit a brick wall, but not even a brick and mortar wall could have long stood up to that kind of punishment, and his sternum was not brick and mortar. His sternum was shattered and bone fragments were driven deep into his body, several of them piercing his heart. He was dead before he hit the ground. Lois returned to ready looking to see who was going to try her next.

Clark didn't like it when he saw her kill one of her attackers but saw that it was done in self-defense, so he felt a little better about it. He had watched her movements and knew that she wasn't going to be struck by the blade and that she was going to be able to defeat her attacker. If she was put into real danger, he would have done whatever he needed to do to prevent her coming to real harm. As it stood, they were in danger of being captured but not mortal danger, that one thug excluded.

He was occupied by two assailants and didn't see it when Lois was herself confronted by a pair, one of which clipped her over the head with his rifle butt. She went down stunned.

Another of their assailants, apparently the one in command, stepped over her and grabbing a handful of her hair dragged her up in front of himself. The pain brought Lois back to consciousness, and she let out a moan of pain and confusion.

Holding a handgun to her temple the squad leader shouted to Charlie, "Stop now or I kill her!" He was speaking a Bantu dialect which Charlie understood, but even if he hadn't, what he saw made it perfectly clear what his meaning was.

Charlie froze. He didn't know what else he could do without revealing what he was. He realized that even at superspeed with the muzzle of the gun pressed against her temple he couldn't stop the bullet from killing her. If he stopped, she wouldn't be in immediate danger, so he stopped and put his hands up. When he did, the thug behind him hit him in the back of the head with his rifle butt. Charlie heard the thug grunt with the effort, and when the blow fell, he rolled with the punch so that the gun butt wouldn't shatter and fell to the ground pretending to be stunned.

The leader pushed Lois away from him and released her hair as he did so. She fell limply to the ground and the leader shouted, "Tie them both up!" Their arms were promptly tied behind their backs, and then they were pulled into a kneeling position side by side.

They watched as the rebels rifled their backpacks, and anything that they thought was of value they stuffed into their pockets, and the rest was cast aside. The camera was well hidden, so it was not found. The roll of film with the pictures already taken had been given to Derek Price for safe keeping before they left port. Only Derek, Linda, and Charlie knew it even existed.

The squad leader started to question them. He too was speaking in a Bantu dialect. Charlie understood, and Lois knew that he understood since he had conversed fluently with the marina owner, but he pretended not to, and she went along with the deception. The squad leader saw that he wasn't getting anywhere because of the language barrier. He knew that one of the officers still with the cargo train was semi-fluent in English, so then he sent a runner for him so that he could do the questioning.

When he arrived, they were still kneeling side by side with several of the rebels covering them with their rifles.

The officer walked up and positioned himself in front of them and then demanded in English. "Who are you, and what are you doeng here followeeng our cargo train?"

Charlie replied, "We were with a safari group, but we got separated from it, and we are lost."

The questioner, Drago, with a look of disdain clearly evident on his face said, "Such a fleemsy lie. There are no safari groups anywhere near thees area. You will tell me the truth or else."

With curiosity evident on his face, Drago started looking more closely at them. As he looked closely at Lois, a look of dawning recognition slowly came over his face.

"*You* are the woman *from the boat*! I almost deendn't recognize you weeth your clothes on," Turning to Charlie he said, "and your playmate. The *two* of you have been *following us* seence we left *Brazzaville!* *Why* do you follow us?"

"We've done nothing to you. Why don't you let us go?" Lois asked wearily

"You keeled one of my men!"

"It was self-defense; he attacked me with a machete."

"He ees steell dead, and I should keel you for eet." He said as he fingered and then started to grip his sidearm preparatory to pulling it from its holster.

Chapter 19 — Linda in Danger

May 22, 1992

Charlie was watching Drago's every move. If he attempted to draw and fire, it would be "secret be damned"; he would act to save Lois.

But Drago took his hand away from his sidearm and asked, "Who are you? Are you weeth the government een Brazzaville?"

Charlie spoke up to take the attention away from Lois. He thought that if they focused on him there would be less likelihood of any further harm being done to Lois. "No, we are not with your government. We aren't even from the Congo. I'm sure you can tell that from the fact that we don't have French accents. We're Americans."

"What are Americans doing followeeng an arms sheepment eento the Congo?"

"We're reporters. We're just following up on a story."

"What story?"

"We are trying to find out just who is supplying the arms so that we can put them in jail."

"So, you admeet your geelt! You are here to stop us from geeteeng the arms we need for the revolution! I should exeeecute both of you on the spot, but the General weel want to know just how much you know and who else knows. I need to take you on to the camp."

Drago picked two of his men to accompany them, and they set off. They marched the rest of that day, passing the cargo train and proceeding on at a faster pace than the cargo train could maintain. They bedded down on the jungle floor for the night. They kept Linda and Charlie separated and stood guard four by four. They started out again early the next morning.

May 23, 1992

Between the trip to the river to pick up the shipment and now on the trip back to camp, they had been on the trail for close to two weeks. Drago's underlings by now were feeling the absence of female companionship which they had with the camp followers. Some of those women were very accommodating. Jabin and Bilson had been walking behind Lois most of the time keeping her separated from Charlie. Speaking in a Bantu dialect Jabin in a low tone said to Bilson, "Look at that sexy sway of her hips. I wish our women were more like that. I remember seeing her on the boat when she was wearing almost nothing. I'd like nothing better than to show her what a real man is like. Once I finished with her, she wouldn't want to go back to that weakling behind us. I'd make her scream with pleasure like she never has before. I'd screw her bowlegged, and she'd be begging for more."

Bilson replied, "Yes, you're right, she'd be begging for more, a real man, like me. Once she sees me, she'll never be satisfied with the likes of you." As he said this he looked at Jabin's groin and held up his hand with the little finger extended.

Jabin retorted, "When we stop we'll see just who can do what with her."

The two guards talked this kind of trash all day, and Charlie had heard every lecherous word spoken, and he didn't like what he had been hearing. At this point he was very happy that Lois didn't understand what was being said.

What he didn't know was that Lois was picking up simply from the tone of the conversation what the gist was. She wasn't sure that she would be able to fend off both of the guards if they worked together to subdue her. She also worried about what would happen to Charlie if he tried to interfere. They hadn't been together for very long, just a couple of months, but Lois believed that she knew him well enough by this time to know for certain that he wouldn't just stand by and allow these men to attack her without doing something in her defense, and that was where her concern lie. With his hands bound behind his back, he would be in no position to put up much of a fight. She was afraid that if he tried to interfere that they would shoot him without any qualms at all. That only steeled her resolve to do whatever she could in her own defense. If she could defeat the attackers herself, then there would be no need for Charlie to interfere.

She started planning how she could take out both of her attackers. She decided that in order to be sure she would have to use deadly force. She started going through a picture in her mind of all the vulnerable spots on the human body which when struck would result in death to the individual. Fortunately they had removed her bonds which was something of a surprise since she had been the one to kill one of her attackers in their scuffle. The

fact that she was a petite woman was working to her advantage in that respect. They obviously thought that her defeat of her two opponents had been a fluke, discounting her abilities.

She rehearsed many of her moves mentally. She started visualizing all of the kata she had perfected as she progressed through the ranks in Tae Kwon Do. She mentally thanked her Sensei for suggesting that when she sparred that she work with larger and stronger as well as higher ranked opponents. That experience has stood her in good stead in the earlier encounter.

When that thug had come at her with the machete, she hadn't been fazed at all. She had been through any number of exercises using that kind of scenario at the Dojo. That had actually been one of the earliest exercises and had followed through becoming more complex with each iteration. Admittedly, in the Dojo they had been using fake weapons and only making light contact, but the principle and the moves were the same. When she had been confronted that way, her training had simply taken over. In the actual situation she didn't hold back and unleashed her full power in the kick with devastating effect. It was afterward that she had come to the realization just how effective the move really was.

She found her arms moving at her sides and had to consciously quell the movements; otherwise it would have been very evident to her guards what she was doing. The muscle memory of the blocks and strikes which are practiced so diligently by practitioners of the martial arts can manifest itself unbidden. When one rises to the higher belts, the moves have been practiced so much that conscious thought is no longer necessary. Muscle memory kicks in, and the body reacts appropriately. The more she thought about it, the more confident she became. She was moving into her Chi, that mental state wherein the discipline rules. A preternatural calm began to pervade her mind. She had progressed from her worry about what would happen to herself, to what would happen to Charlie, to her Chi which could be looked upon as the calm before the storm. She knew that when the time came, she would and more importantly ***could*** do what needed to be done. She would rescue herself and Charlie from their captors. As long as her situational awareness was maintained, as long as she knew exactly what each of her attackers was doing and that included Drago, she felt confident of the outcome of the encounter.

Charlie was afraid that they would actually try something when they stopped. The question was what could he do that wouldn't reveal what he was? If he couldn't come up with something that would do the job and yet conceal just what he could do, he would have to act overtly. He didn't want to take the chance of Lois being injured. He had to think of something and do it quickly. It didn't take too long for him to hit on a plan that he thought would work. In order for his plan to work, it would require both of Drago's underlings to be in relatively close proximity. If Drago himself was near them that would be even better. If it worked, it would not only eliminate the threat which these men posed to Lois in particular and to both of them in general but could get both of them away from their captors completely. If only he had been able to let Lois know his plan, but they were keeping them separated.

As they were leaving the jungle and entering the prairie grasslands Drago called a halt. Behind them the sounds of the jungle were fading, and the sounds of the grassland were starting to manifest. In front of them they could hear the cry of the big cats as they were in the hunt. There were fewer bird sounds. They could also hear the quieter sounds of the antelopes and other grass feeders as they moved about. Lois' hands had been untied, but Charlie's were still tied behind his back.

Lois knew that the greatest danger would manifest when a halt was called. In some respects she dreaded this, but in others she looked forward to it. Mentally she was as prepared as she could be.

All day Charlie had looked for a chance to put his plan into action. When it did come, it came later than he had expected. It was along toward dusk, shortly after a halt was called for, that Drago's two underlings decided it was time to make their move. They were both walking toward Lois with grasping hands and evil intent in their eyes. Drago didn't say anything. He couldn't have cared less if his men roughed up the prisoners and had some fun with the woman in the process; in fact the idea crossed his mind that he might just like to have a go at her himself. He kept remembering how she had looked in that skimpy bikini.

Lois had been waiting for this. She knew that the attack would come very soon. She turned to face her guards and prepared herself. Very subtly she shifted her body into a ready stance but kept her arms at her sides so as not to give away the fact that she was prepared for the encounter. She was surprised when Charlie started moving. All she could do was look on in horror.

Seeing them start to make their move, Charlie decided that it was time to put his plan into action. He ran at them and then leaped and twisted in the air so that he sailed into both of them with a flying body block. It was a maneuver that most soccer players could perform, so there was no hint that he was actually flying as he did it. Landing on top of them as they hit the ground on their backs, he managed to use his head to head butt the one under the chin to stun him slightly. As he was getting up, he kned the other one in the groin. His objective was to draw their attention away from Lois and pin it on him.

Feeling pretty certain that this was accomplished, he got to his feet and ran, drawing the attention of Drago who was shouting at him and at his men. Charlie took off into the grass which was waist high making sure that he was going at a realistic pace and was keeping their attention focused on him. Keeping their attention on ***him*** and not on Lois was the key. As his men recovered Drago shouted at them to shoot Charlie. As they both shouldered their rifles and fired, Charlie felt the dual impacts and dropped to the ground trying to make it look like he had been hit. He heard Lois wail, ****Charlie?!?!**** It pained him that he hadn't had a chance to tell her his plan and had to let her believe that he had been killed.

As soon as he was below the level of the grass he snapped the ropes around his wrists.

Drago ordered Jabin to go look for him and make sure that he was dead. Jabin, holding his rifle at the ready, moved off on Charlie's trail. When he got to the vicinity of where Charlie had dropped he started looking around, poking into the grass with his rifle barrel. Suddenly Jabin dropped from sight without a sound. Drago didn't see him go down; it happened so fast.

When Drago noticed that he was no longer visible, he ordered Bilson to go look for him.

This time Drago was careful to watch his subordinate while he searched. As he was watching Bilson suddenly disappeared. It looked like he had fallen into a hole in the ground.

Drago thought that this could be a possibility since the practice of digging pits to trap animals was still practiced in this area by the local population. He ordered Lois to get onto her feet and to follow his men.

Lois was distraught at the thought that Charlie had been killed. When she had seen them shoot at him and had seen him go down, she had collapsed to the ground in a dead faint. As she was coming to, all she could think about was her anguish at losing him. If he was dead, she didn't know how she would go on. She didn't react when Drago ordered her to her feet. She screamed in pain as Drago grabbed a handful of her hair and dragged her to her feet. Once she was on her feet, he released his grip on her hair and gave her a shove which sent her stumbling ahead. She was like an automaton as she trudged up the trail in the wake of Drago's men.

Suddenly Drago spotted Jabin trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey with his own belt and boot laces. Drago was instantly on the alert and pulled his side arm. When he saw Bilson in the same condition, he jabbed his gun in Lois back. He shouted to Charlie, “I know you are out there. Give yourself up or I keel her!”

When Lois heard this her despair instantly vanished. <He’s threatening me to get Charlie! He must still be ***alive!***> There was an instant surge of joy which filled her heart at the thought. Then the reality of the situation hit her. <Drago has a gun in my back! How can I get out of this? That move that Charlie used on me!> Lois started moving her left arm across her back in an attempt to knock the gun away. She succeeded in moving it to the side somewhat, but as she turned and started to reach with her right hand to grab his forearm, she missed the grab and Drago was able to bring the gun back to bear.

Charlie had circled wide and around to get behind Drago and was sneaking up on his previous location when he found that Drago had moved. That threw Charlie off. He suddenly saw movement out in the grass. It was Lois starting to use the Windmill. He shouted, “Linda, NO!!!” and started to run at superspeed

Drago wasn’t going to put up with this. He pulled the trigger, point blank hitting Lois just under the ribs on the left side in the front.

Charlie realized that Drago was at point blank range and a bullet from his gun would only be traveling inches before she was hit. They were too far away for him to get there even at superspeed to intervene, and he heard a shot fired just before he reached Drago.

He heard Lois cry, “Charlie!!!” and he saw Lois start to crumple like a marionette with the strings cut.

Again he shouted, “Linda!!!!” and was on top of Drago.

He grabbed the gun and yanked it from his hand, breaking Drago’s trigger finger and crushing the gun in the process. Then he hit him; fortunately he automatically pulled his punch so that he didn’t do more than knock him out and possibly break his jaw.

Lois had collapsed to the ground. There was a gaping hole in her upper abdomen where the bullet had entered. The blood was not oozing from the wound, it was gushing. Charlie knew that losing blood that fast would kill a person very quickly, so time was of the essence. He ripped off the hem of her shirt and used it to try to staunch the blood flow or at least slow it down somewhat. He quickly X-rayed her. When he did, he saw just how seriously injured she was. He knew that he didn’t have much time to get her to a hospital. He had to move her quickly.

She said weakly, between gasping breaths, “Charlie ... it hurts ... so ... bad. I don’t ... want to ... die. Help me ... Charlie. Charlie, I lo ... ” as she passed out.

As he scooped her up Charlie shouted at her, “Don’t you die on me! Come on, stay with me! I love you! I need you!” He cradled her head against his shoulder as he took off with her in his arms and flew toward Brazzaville. He kept talking to her the entire time he had her in his arms. The incident had started at dusk, and by the time he was airborne, it was dark.

What Charlie didn’t see was the native at the verge of the jungle that was watching as he took flight. He was a runner being sent on to the camp by the cargo party to request a relief party of bearers. He had been attracted by the sounds of gunfire and was approaching the area with caution. When the native saw Charlie take flight, he fled back the way he had come in panic believing him to be an evil spirit.

She was in and out of consciousness as he flew. It took almost five minutes to get her to Brazzaville. That was where the nearest quality hospital was located. Because of her condition he had hurried, but he still had to take it slow enough so as not to aggravate the injury.

He landed as softly as he could outside the hospital and

carried her in to the Emergency Room. Placing her gently on a gurney he started shouting for help. Immediately a nurse and an ER doctor rushed over, and the doctor took charge. The doctor started shouting orders. “We have a gunshot wound people. Two lines — D5W and normal saline. Type and cross-match. The surgeon will need the complete picture, CAT Scan — STAT and prep for surgery.” The ER team was very efficient. The two IVs were started almost before he had completed all the orders. Blood was drawn for the type & cross-match for whole blood transfusions. They sent her immediately for a CAT scan. A CAT scan will give a virtual 3-D image allowing the doctor to follow the path the bullet had taken and more easily determine the extent of the tissue damage, where the bullet was lodged, extent of internal bleeding, etc. More information than a simple X-ray would give. In many cases the extra time is worth the benefit. In reality the difference in time is not as great as some would think.

Charlie followed her progress through the rooms using his X-ray vision up until they took her into surgery.

The doctor stopped as he hurried on his way to the surgical suite to get permission to operate. He introduced himself as Dr. M’benga. Charlie gave him permission to operate, calling himself her husband. Doctor M’benga said, “I’m going to be honest with you. I’m not sure she is going to pull through. The CAT Scan indicates severe internal injury. I’ll do my best. I’ll have a better idea when we complete the operation. When I finish I’ll come here and find you.

In the middle of the surgery. -

Imperceptible to human or even superhuman senses there was a disruption of the space/time continuum when there was a problem with the operation. What could most easily be described as a ‘snap shot’ of the current universe — Alpha 023 x Gamma 004 x Tau 036 was created, although it was slightly out of phase with the original. This was caused by a difference in the vibratory characteristics of the copy. A later analysis of the data would show that a new universe had been created with vibratory characteristics Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 040.

%%%%%%%%%%
Universal Locator Designation
Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 040
%%%%%%%%%%
Three hours later

Charlie saw Doctor M’benga and another doctor approaching from the operating theater. They had been operating on Lois for three hours. They were obviously fatigued, and they came in through the waiting room doors and looked around. When the doctor saw Charlie, he walked over to him. With the fatigue and also concern written all over his face he introduced his assistant, “This is Doctor Bashir.” Then Doctor M’benga said, as if by way of excuse, “We did the best we could.”

Chapter 20 — The Outcome

May 23, 1993 11:30 PM

Dr. M’benga continued “The internal injuries were very serious. The results of a gunshot of that caliber at close range ... the soft tissue damage was extensive.”

“She lost a great quantity of blood internally. We had to remove the spleen and the left kidney which were both damaged by the bullet. We also had to resect portions of the bowel.”

“The next few hours will tell the tale. We have moved her into recovery. She will be there until she wakes up from the anesthesia, and then she will be moved to a semi-private ... ”

Clark interrupted at this point, “I would like her moved to a private room.”

Dr. M’benga continued “As you wish, a private room.” Clark said, “Please have her moved from recovery to the

room immediately. I need to be ... no, I ***must*** be there when she wakes up. I don't want her to wake up and not know where she is and not have someone that she knows there with her. The worst thing that I can conceive of would be to wake up and be totally alone or have no one but strangers around. I've been alone, doctor, and I don't want that happening to her, ever. I am the only one that she knows here, therefore I have to be with her when she awakes. She was unconscious from the time she was shot, so she will not even know where she is. Just make sure that there is a chair in the room with her."

Dr. M'benga turned to Dr. Bashir and said, "Please see to it." Dr. Bashir acknowledged and turned away to make the necessary arrangements.

"Dr. M'benga, what are the reporting requirements in a case like this? She was shot by one of the rebels as we were in the process of being abducted. I'm sure that the rebels didn't hang around to be caught, so the chances of locating them are vanishingly small."

"It is extremely unusual for the rebels to be here in the city. They mostly stay in the north in the Bantu districts. What was their interest in an American couple? Were they possible planning to hold you for ransom? Their motives are really beside the point. I suppose we could possibly report this as a street crime. The police could ask you for a description of the shooter."

"That would be no problem. I got a very good look at him."

"In that case this should become a fairly routine matter. We don't have quite the number of shootings we used to have before Mayor D'Arnet. I will need to report the shooting to the police in the morning. They will probably take a few days before they come in to interview you and Mrs. King. The wheels of bureaucracy grind slowly."

"I would hope that they would wait until Mrs. King is strong enough for an interview."

"I am sure that they will not be coming in before she is able to see them."

Clark had another question for Dr. M'benga. "Doctor, how long will she need to remain in the hospital? I would like to take her to our suite as soon as possible. We will be near by at the Bonne Nuit de Sommeil."

He replied, "That all depends entirely upon her. If her will to live is strong enough and she has the correct motivation, she could be recovered enough to be released in three weeks. Actually that also depends on how well you will take care of her afterwards. We'll see as time progresses."

After a few minutes Dr. Bashir returned and said, "Mrs. King will be moved to room 105 in just a few minutes. It is just down the east corridor from the lobby."

Clark said, "Thank you Dr. Bashir. I'll go there immediately. Is there anything I need to know to look for? Will she be being monitored?"

Dr. M'benga answered, "Yes, she will be on a number of monitors. There will be EKG, respiratory rate, blood oxygen, etc. She will have a couple of IVs going, and she has been catheterized. At this point we have given her three units of whole blood as well as the electrolytes she was given when she first arrived. We need to be wary of peritonitis because her bowel was pierced. We will, however, give you as much privacy as we can under the circumstances."

"Since you will be with her, I would encourage you to actually talk to her. The unconscious mind is a tricky device. Even though there is no conscious recognition of the spoken word, the brain will record what is being said, and in some cases the unconscious mind will even manifest the words and treat it like a dream. The unconscious mind is not totally inactive which can be demonstrated by an EEG. In layman's language talk to her for as long as you can. She may not respond, but she will hear you, and if her desire to be with you is strong enough, it will

insure that she wakes up from the anesthesia. Your presence and your words will act like an anchor to keep her grounded here with you, and she can, metaphorically, pull herself back to you by that anchor line."

Clark said, "Thank you Dr. M'benga. I'll be vigilant, and if I see anything amiss, I will immediately use the call button to summon the nurse." He reached out and shook Dr. M'benga's hand, and then he exited the waiting room and after passing through the lobby proceeded down the east corridor to room 105.

Lois wasn't there as yet, so he sat down to wait. He was very nervous and found that he couldn't remain in the chair for long. He got up and started pacing back and forth across the room as he thought. To a certain extent his thoughts were jubilant. <She is going to be all right! I got her here in time!>

As he continued to pace back and forth Clark worried over what had happened. The longer the delay, the more he had an opportunity to mull over the circumstances of her injury. Unconsciously his pacing got faster and faster until he was crossing the room at superspeed. When he caught himself and realized just what he was doing, he noticed the path he had worn in the tile by his travels. He hoped that it wouldn't be noticed by the staff when they brought her in.

He couldn't get past the nagging feeling that somehow he was the cause of her injury as well as her savior. <What if I hadn't been there? If I hadn't been there, would she have even been there? It was because of me that we knew where the shipment was located. Is it my fault that she was shot? Would she have found the shipment and followed it if I hadn't been there? If that had been the case, would she have been shot anyway, and without me there to get her to the hospital, wouldn't she have died at the scene? It was a mortal wound.>

He thought back on what Herb had told him. It was his belief that whatever happened was simply history playing itself out. What if Herb had been wrong? He had allowed for that possibility. <Was this history being played out, or was this a change in history? This ***had*** to be a change in history. In 1997 she was dead, and now she will be alive. Simple logic dictated that this was not be history playing itself out. That would only pertain if we immediately moved to 1997. Her continued presence in this time frame was not what had been recorded as history. This couldn't help but be a change of history. If she had died, then the situation which existed when I found out about her because of the other Lois would have indeed been the case. Now that situation will not exist. I can't be sure. If only Herb was here. Why didn't Herb think this through before we did this. In order to put history aright, Lois would have to die, and I'm not about to let that happen. But at this point we have no idea what the final outcome is going to be. Herb could go back to 1997 to check and see if everything is as it was when I left, but he's not here, so there's no one to ask.> These thoughts kept circling around in his mind.

<Did the fact that she survived the gunshot wound now constitute a change in history? Aside from the obvious fact that she should be dead and now she is alive, how could this be history as it was. It's impossible for this to be a continuation. Well, frankly I don't care if it's a change in history or not. So what if this changes history. If it does, then I'm all for it. This way she's with me, and I'm not alone anymore. All it will change is the fact that she can now appear in the future and dispel the erroneous rumors of her death. But, do we skip ahead or go with the flow? Do we hop a ride with Herb or live out the time? All I care about is the fact that she is going to survive. We can now have a life ***together***.> These specific thoughts and many like them occupied his time until Lois was wheeled into the room and transferred to the bed by the staff.

When the staff had completed transferring her to the bed, he moved over to her side. Lois looked very drawn and pale, but as

far as Charlie was concerned she was the most ***beautiful*** woman he had ever seen in his life — bar none. She was still unconscious from the anesthesia, so there was a peaceful look on her face. He was happy to see that they didn't have her on a respirator because that meant that she was breathing on her own which was a good sign.

He glanced at the monitors to see what they were displaying so that he would have a point of reference. There was an automatic blood pressure cuff on her left arm which inflated and deflated at regular intervals adding the recorded pressures to the display. There was an electronic line which displayed a tracing of her heart rhythm. There was a display of the number indicating the oxygen level in her blood and another which indicated her rate of respiration. From his limited knowledge they all looked to be within the normal range.

He moved the chair over next to the bed, and he sat down in it on her right side, the side away from all the monitors.

Clark reached out and took her hand in his and said, "Lois, I'm here. I'm not leaving your side, not for a minute. I know that you can hear me. At least that's what I have been told. That a person that is unconscious can still hear what is being said, and it registers on the unconscious mind. It acts like an anchor to bring the person back. I want you back."

"The doctors have told me that you will recover, and I want to do everything I can to make that happen. I want you to hear me. I want you to know how much I love you. I can't say that enough, I love you. You need to know that. I'll be saying that to you a lot. I love you, Lois Lane. I want you to be with me always, forever."

"I think you love me too at least I hope you do. The last thing you said before you blacked out was, 'Charlie, I lo.' I can only hope that you were going to say 'love you'."

"I know that we haven't been together for very long, but there are some things about us that you don't know about. There are some things that make a difference. We are meant to be together. We were never meant to be apart. I ***had*** to find you. After meeting the other Lois and seeing what she and her Clark had, I ***had*** to find you. I know what they have, and I want that for us. I really need to tell you all about them and the times I've been with them. You and she are like two peas in a pod. Your personality is just like hers. I couldn't help falling in love with you. I thought that I was in love with her, and I might have been, but now that we are together I see that it was a pale shadow of what we have together. When I touched her, I felt a similar tingle to what we share, but ours is so much stronger it shocked me as much as it did you the first time we touched. I had been expecting it, so it didn't startle me quite as much as it did you, but I was still surprised at the strength of it. The first time I put your sun tan lotion on you, I couldn't believe what I felt. The tingle felt like it traveled all the way up my arms, and when you touched me in the jungle that time, it felt like liquid fire everywhere you touched me."

"We are going to be ***so*** happy together. Already you have made a difference in my life. All the time since Lois left, I have had a hollow place in the center of my chest. A Lois-sized hole that no one else could fill. Then you came along. Now that hole is a perfect fit for you. When you were shot, when you passed out on me, I thought I had lost you again. I almost died there beside you."

"I knew that I had to act to save you. I know that Herb warned me that I couldn't risk revealing my powers because I hadn't been revealed as Superman as yet, but I had to act. I couldn't let you die even if it meant revealing what and who I am. I couldn't let the only woman I have or ever will truly love die no matter what the repercussions."

"I flew you here as fast as I was able to given your condition. The doctors say it was a near thing. But you're tough. You're a

strong woman. You're the only woman fit to be the partner of Superman. I need you with me. I need you so much. Come back to me Lois. Come back to me. I love you, more than you will ever know."

Clark continued on in this fashion for several hours. Finally the emotional drain and the energy expenditure caught up with him, and he fell asleep holding her hand and with his head on the bed next to her. Without realizing it he was doing the best thing he could possibly be doing for her. The simple act of holding her hand and being with her. Time would reveal just how important that act could be.

Chapter 21 — A Declaration of Love

May 24, 1992

A few hours later Charlie awoke to the feel of a hand on his head and fingers in his hair. He looked up to see Lois looking at him. His face lit up with joy and he started to smile when she said, "Charlie."

He replied, "Lois, I have been waiting to hear you say that. How long have you been awake?"

"Just a few minutes. I was hearing you talking to me. I wanted to get back to you, but it was like I was wading through molasses. Charlie, what happened? I remember that I was shot. What happened after that? I remember waking up a few times, but I must have been delirious because it felt like I was flying in an open cockpit airplane. All that wind. Where are we? This looks like a big hospital. Are we in Brazzaville? How did we get here?"

Trying to deflect her Clark asked, "How are you feeling?"

Lois replied, "Kinda woozy. They must have me on some heavy duty pain meds. What happened? All I remember is I was shot, then you were there. Then I woke up here."

"They had to operate. You have lost your spleen and your left kidney. They also had to do something with your intestines. But the important thing is that you're alive."

"Lois, I have a question. I need to ask, and I hope you will answer."

"Charlie, if I can, I'll answer."

"When you were shot as you were lying there, you called for me. Just as you passed out you started to say something. You said, 'Charlie, I lo ...'. You didn't complete it. What were you trying to say?"

"Charlie, I was saying that I love you." With a little chuckle she continued. "I'm just glad it wasn't my dying declaration because I never finished it."

"Lois, my Lois, you don't know how long I have wanted to hear that from you. How I have longed to tell you that I love you. I know I told you the other morning in the tent, but that was before. Now all the questions are behind us. Now I can give vent to all my feelings. I have loved you for a long time. I'm going to say something that won't make a lot of sense to you, but please accept that I'll explain later. I have loved you since before I even met you. I have loved you for well over a year. I know that sounds absurd. How could I love someone I never even met before? Just believe me. I'll explain."

"I have another question. But first I have to tell you something. Remember how I said my name was Charles King ***for now***? Well, my name isn't Charles King, and I'm not a stringer for the *Daily Planet*."

Lois replied, "I knew that."

Somewhat taken aback by this response, he said, "You knew that? How?"

Lois replied, "When you showed me your ID. For one thing they don't give stringers an ID. For another thing the style of the ID was wrong. It didn't look like mine. At first I thought that you might be working for the gun runners, so I decided to play along until I could find out for sure. I decided some time ago that you

were on the side of the angels and that I could trust you.”

Charlie was chuckling as he said, “I should have known that I couldn’t put anything over on Lois Lane. Well, my name is really Clark Kent.”

Lois said, “I think I like that better than Charlie.”

Clark said, “Charlie King is the name I use when I go undercover on assignments.”

Lois asked, “When I decided that you weren’t with the gun runners, I came to the conclusion that you were a government agent. What are you, NIA, ATF, FBI?”

Clark responded with, “Right now that doesn’t matter. What matters is that I’m a guy that is in love with you. I just needed to tell you my real name before I asked you my next question. Lois Lane, will you make me the happiest man alive, will you marry me?”

“Clark, we haven’t known each other for very long. I can’t say that I have been in love with you for over a year like you say you have with me, and you’re definitely going to have to explain that one. I do think I have been falling in love with you for a while. Everything just feels so right with you. When I thought that Drago’s men had killed you, I thought my world had ended. I couldn’t bear the thought of going on without you and wanted to die with you. There was this Charlie sized hole in my heart. Then when Drago started threatening me to get you to come out, and I realized that you must still be alive my world lit up again. I realized then that I didn’t want to be separated from you again, so yes, Clark Kent, I will marry you.”

“Lois, my Lois I have so much to say. I have so much that you need to know about me and about us. We are going to have a lifetime together and that may not be long enough for everything I want to show you and do with you. I don’t want to wait any longer. If it’s okay with you, in a few days I’ll make arrangements with Jacques D’Armet to come in to the hospital and marry us.”

Lois replied, “It’s going to shock a lot of people when they find out that I’ve gotten married, Perry White in particular. I’ve always worked alone and haven’t even so much as dated since college, but this just feels soooo right. I don’t know how else to express it. Being with you I feel content, comforted, protected, and complete. I’ve never felt this way with anyone before and don’t think I could feel this way with anyone else. I feel like we have been married for a while now, at least emotionally so why not in actuality? Just give me some time to heal a little. I want to be able to stand up on my own when we’re married.”

Noticing that Lois was starting to look fatigued, Clark told her that he had some errands to do and that he would be back after a while. He suggested that she should get some sleep. Leaning over he gave her a kiss. As he was doing this her hand came up and caressed his cheek. He said, “I’ll be back shortly. Please get some sleep while I’m gone.”

She replied, “I am kind of tired. I think I will take a nap.”

He gave her another kiss and exited the room.

As he was exiting the room he almost literally ran into Dr. M’benga. The doctor asked, “How is she?”

“Doctor M’benga, so nice to see you. She seems to be doing just fine. She came out of the anesthesia a short time ago. We spoke for a while. She was getting tired, so I encouraged her to go back to sleep promising that I would return later.”

“That is good news. Is she in an unusual amount of pain?”

“She didn’t appear to be. She said that she was feeling somewhat woozy and attributed it to pain killers.”

“We do have her on some rather strong pain killers. As she progresses we’ll be reducing the dosage so that she shouldn’t experience any after effects of those. There is always the concern about addiction in these kinds of cases. As long as the medications are used in doses sufficient to mitigate the pain and as the pain diminishes, the dosage reflects that reduction any

chance of addiction can be avoided. I’ll try not to disturb her if she is resting. I just need to check to see that all the monitors are registering properly.”

“Thank you, doctor, for everything you have done for her. I really appreciate it.”

“No thanks are necessary, my boy. It’s my job, and even if I do say so myself, one I am good at. I never like to lose a patient. I have to admit it was touch and go there for a while. I thought we had lost her.”

“Doctor M’benga, I may not be able to adequately express my appreciation to you at this time, but rest assured I will express it appropriately when the time is right. <How apropos that statement really is, when the time is right. When we have caught up to the time that we actually belong in, Superman will do something appropriate for this hospital out of gratitude for what this doctor has done.> With that thought Clark left the hospital.

Clark’s first stop was Artois’ Jewelry Shoppe where he and Lois had gone to when they had purchased their wedding bands. He had been watching Lois as they were browsing the store and had seen her reaction to a particular engagement ring. He purchased it and placed the little velvet covered box in his pocket. Next he went to a flower shop and ordered flowers to be sent to the hospital room 105. Next he went back to Bonne Nuit de Sommeil and rented suite 501 again, this time paying for 6 months in advance.

When visiting hours came around, Clark was there. They spent the time just holding hands and talking and enjoying being together. Reluctantly when visiting hours were over, Clark returned to the suite.

After it was dark, he flew to the outskirts of Dongou and then walked in to the port area. He found the man he had hired to guard the Ubuntu and told him that he would be removing some things but that he was still on the payroll until he moved the Ubuntu back to Brazzaville. Accordingly he packed Lois’ and his clothing and carried the bags toward town. When he was out of sight of any prying eyes, he took off straight up until he was out of sight and flew directly to the Bonne Nuit de Sommeil and landed on the roof. He took the bags to the suite and placed them all in the master bedroom.

The next day when he got to the hospital, he entered the room to find Lois awake. As soon as she saw him, she held out her free hand to him in invitation. He crossed the floor and took her hand in his <She has some color in her cheeks today. That’s a good sign! She is really going to make it. Let’s see Dr. M’benga said three weeks. Can I wait that long? I’ve got to hold her.> He asked, “How are you today?”

She answered, “Better, now that you’re here. I’ve missed you, where have you been? I need you here with me because I feel so much better when you hold me. I crave your touch so.”

Clark responded, “Well, I had some things to do. I had to get the suite ready for taking you home with me. But I came as soon as I was able to.” Lois could sense the eagerness in his voice, and she felt the same eagerness to be with him.

She said, “I loved the flowers. Who sent the other arrangement?”

Clark hadn’t noticed the other flowers; he had only had eyes for her. He replied, “I don’t know. Let’s look at the card and see.” He pulled the card and read it. It was in French wishing Linda a speedy recovery and was signed with affection by Madam D’Armet. He said, “I wonder how she found out about you being in the hospital.”

The answer to that question was actually forthcoming. A few minutes later Dr. Bashir came in to check on Linda. “And how is our patient today?” he asked.

Lois replied “I’ve been better, but I’m happy to be alive.” With a sideways glance at Clark she thought, <And with Clark.>

Dr. Bashir continued, “I cannot tell you how happy I am to

have been part of the team that saved the life of one of the saviors of our esteemed Mayor's family. I recognized you from the picture that was in the paper. I called the mayor's office and notified them of your circumstances. They requested that I personally keep them advised of your progress."

Lois looked at Clark and said, "*That* explains the flowers!" Clark nodded.

Dr. Bashir busied himself with checking her vitals and making annotations on her chart. When he had finished that he examined the surgery site to make sure it was knitting properly. He then asked how she felt, was she in any pain? Her answer was no, she felt just fine. At this Dr. Bashir started to question her more closely. "Just how fine do you feel?"

Lois said, "Actually it feels like I have a little bit of a buzz on."

Dr. Bashir responded, "I think we need to reduce your pain killers a bit. Here is what we are going to do. I am going to write an order for a reduction by twenty five percent at your next dose. I will be back to see you after that should have taken effect. If you are a little bit uncomfortable, we will adjust the dose slightly until you are comfortable but just barely. We don't want you becoming addicted to these medications."

Lois replied, "Thank you doctor. I don't want to become dependent on them either."

Dr. Bashir made a notation on her chart, gave Clark a wink, and exited.

Clark walked over to the bed. He had a somewhat concerned expression on his face as he sat down in the chair and asked.

"Lois, how are you really feeling?"

Lois replied, "I'm feeling okay." <He is a worry wart, but I love it.>

Somewhat shyly he asked, "Remember what I asked you earlier?"

She replied, "Yes."

With some apprehension in his voice he asked, "Have you changed your mind?"

Lois replied firmly and with conviction, "Not in a million years."

"If that's the case ... " He pulled the box out of his pocket and offered it to her. "Can I give you this?"

Lois opened the box and gasped then she said, "Oh, Clark, it's beautiful. I love it."

Then with growing conviction he said, "Then let me ask you again. Lois Lane, will you marry me?"

She replied with equal conviction, "Yes, I will."

Clark took the ring out of the box and placed it on her finger. Then he leaned in and kissed her and then said, "You've just made me the happiest man alive."

They spent the rest of the visiting hours together talking about the future, making some very grandiose plans.

After morning visiting hours were over, Clark went back to m. Artois where they had purchased the rings and took one of the uncut gems from the bag with him. The gem he chose was what he believed to be a blue sapphire. When m. Artois examined it, he was completely beside himself he was so excited. "Zis stone eet weighs in at roughly two t'ousand seven 'undred carats. What type of stone ees eet? Eet appears to be a blue sapphire; 'owever zee density measure ees not right. Eet appears zat zee molec-u-lar weight ees wrong even for zee star sapphire alzo eet ees very close. Eet must be a star sapphire, and eef eet ees zen eet ees zee largest uncut stone of zis type evair dis-cover-ed. After eet ees cut and polished, zee primary stone weel dwarf zee Black Star of Queensland by a fac-tor of t'ree and zee Star of India by a fac-tor of five. We should notify zee Gemological zoziety of ziss find!"

Clark replied, "Actually I don't want the notoriety; let's just keep this between ourselves, okay? You may document as much as you wish. I simply request confidentiality."

Disappointed but agreeable the jeweler continued his evaluation. He determined that this was not just a Sapphire but a Star Sapphire of highest quality. "Ziss ees a remark-able gem. W'en cut and polish-ed, you weel 'ave a great number of gems, all of zee 'ighest quality. I've nevair zeen anysang like ziss een my entire career of forty years. You could 'ave sever-al large gems wiss some smaller or fewer large and an even larger quantity of smaller gems. I would recommend at least t'ree to five larger gems in the five 'undred to one t'ousand carat range, several medium say five to ten carat and zee balance smaller."

Clark commissioned the jeweler to cut, polish, and mount the resulting gems. "I would like at least a ring, ear rings, necklace, anklet, bracelet and tiara. You can add any other pieces as you see fit and if you have the stones to do it."

The jeweler said, "Ziss set weel be a masterpiece, my Sistine Chapel ... my Mona Lisa as it were. Eet weel bee zee crowning jewel of my work. Zee opportunity to work weeth zuch a gem as ziss, eet ees inspirational!"

Clark had given it some thought and had made a sketch. He gave the sketch to the jeweler, and as he looked it over, he explained what he had in mind. Clark asked, "There is going to be a special event in about ten days. Would it be possible to have at least some of the pieces ready within that time?"

The jeweler brought out a selection of settings for Clark to choose from. He allowed Clark to pick out the settings for the gems, and then said, "Rest assur-ed zat we will be able to meet your deadline. We should be able to complete zee entire zet by zen. I weel 'ave one of my apprentices start on zee gold work, preparing zee settings. I person-all-y weel cut and polish zee stones. Ziss set weel be my masterpiece! I am sure zat you weel be very well pleas-ed wiss zee result. May I 'ave your permission to at least tak pictures of zee completed zet?"

Clark replied, "Of course you may. I am sure you would want a memento. Thank you for everything you are doing for me."

"No, I t'ank you for zee opportu-nity to work wiss zuch a special gem. Eet ees my pleasure"

Clark shook hands with him and left.

Chapter 22 — Double Star of the Congo

June 3, 1992

Ten days and ten flower arrangements later Lois seemed to be well on the way to healing. Clark had been spending virtually all of her waking hours with her. They had spent the majority of the time discussing the future that they would have together, where they were going to live and how they would work together predominating. Lois was anxious to get out of the hospital so that they could complete the investigation. Clark was placed in a quandary because of this. <That story was never filed. In the other universe this story resulted in Lois' first Kerth award. What should I do? I need to check some things out. If this is a change of history, what other changes have been made? I need to get into the office and use the computer. How can I do that? I want to be here with Lois. I guess it can wait.>

In the evening during visiting hours, Madam D'Arnet and the children came in to see how Linda was doing. It was a very pleasant visit. As they were preparing to depart she turned to Linda and said, "Linda, when zay release you from zee 'ospital, you must come and stay wiss us in zee Mayor's residence."

Clark talked that over with Lois before he replied. "We thank you very much for your offer Madam D'Arnet, but we have a suite in Bonne Nuit de Sommeil, and we'll be very comfortable."

Clark had another short discussion with Lois and then turned to Madam D'Arnet and asked, "Would it be possible for us to meet with m. D'Arnet. We do have a favor to ask of him."

She replied, "I weel ask heem to stop by for zee morning visiting hours tomorrow. Is zere a message I should give heem?"

Clark replied, "Just say that it is a confidential matter. That it

has to do with two people in love.”

With this Madam D’Arnet looked back and forth between Clark and Lois. She saw how he was standing very protectively at her side and hadn’t released her hand even for a minute the entire time she had been with them. She saw that in place of the wedding bands formerly worn by the couple Linda was now wearing an engagement ring. She got a very knowing look on her face. She had taken in all the signs, and it really didn’t take a Sherlock Holmes to figure out what they wanted to talk to her husband about. She said, “Mes enfants, I weel be more zan ‘appy to pass on your message. Two people een love. Zair love needs to be ‘elped along. We want zat love to last for all of time when it came zo close to being lost. We must ensure zat it can be experienced to zee full. I weel tell my ‘usband zat ‘e ‘as to meet wiss two people in love in zee morning. If zair is anysang else I can do to ‘elp two lovers, let me know. You weel always ‘ave a friend in Madeleine D’Arnet.”

They looked at each other and then at her. The look on their faces told her that she was correct. She kissed Clark on the cheek and then leaned in over Lois and placing her mouth close to Lois’ ear, in her accented English whispered, “My dear, you ‘ave nossing to fear. I weel see to eet zat Jacques weel do what ees needed.” She then kissed her on the cheek, collected her children, and left.

After they had left, Clark turned to Lois and said, “I think she knows.”

Lois replied with a little chuckle, “I know she knows.”

Visiting hours were ending. Clark told Lois that he had some things to attend to and that he would be back in the morning. He leaned in and kissed her and said goodnight.

Clark changed into his black outfit and flew to Dongou. He found the guard and paid him what was owed. He then went on board the Ubuntu and released the spring lines. He started up the engine and eased out of the slip. He sped up to about fifteen knots once he was out of the harbor. As soon as he was out of sight of Dongou, he idled the engine and planting his feet firmly on the deck started flying while standing there. Once he got the Ubuntu up to about seventy five knots he maintained that speed until he got into the vicinity of Impfondo. He slowed to fifteen knots until he was past their port area and then again sped up. Occasionally he would get her up to eighty five knots. By the time it was visiting hours at the hospita,l he had the Ubuntu back in her slip in the port of Brazzaville.

He arrived at the hospital just as visiting hours were to begin. He went to Lois’ room. As he opened the door, she spotted him and her face almost literally lit up. Her smile was enough to brighten his day. She held out both hands to him. He started at this. Both hands! He said, “They’ve taken you off all the monitors! That’s wonderful!”

“Yes, and Dr. Bashir told me that at this rate he expects that they may be able to release me a few days earlier than they had thought. Wanting to be with you to hold you properly has been better than any medicine they could be giving me to help me heal quickly. I love you, Clark Kent, and I want to be with you.”

With open affection on his face and in his voice Clark said, “I love you Lois Lane, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. The sooner we can start that life together the better. I do think that we’ll need to postpone the honeymoon until you’re fully recovered, but then we’ll be able to go wherever you want to for our honeymoon. What do you say to that?”

“I’ve always wanted to go to Hawaii.”

Clark replied with a huge grin, “Then Hawaii it shall be! I’ll make all of the arrangements, when the time is right.”

“I’ll hold you to that. But what about your regular work? How will time off like that affect your job?”

Clark replied, “Think of it like this — I’m on an extended paid vacation, a vacation on which I intend to devote all my time

to taking care of you. I think that I have about four and a half years before I will be called upon to go back to work.”

“Wow, what company do you work for that you can have that much time off?”

“Actually, in my ‘part time job’ I’m self-employed. I know more mystery. I’ll be explaining. I know to quote someone I care for very much ‘I’ve got a lot of explaining to do.’ Rest assured that I will. After you’re out of the hospital, we’ll take some time, and I’ll explain everything. No more secrets. Just for now, I ask that you be patient.”

Lois said, “I trust you Clark. I love you more than I ever imagined I would love anyone. I owe you my life.”

Just then m. D’Arnet walked in. “ello my friends. Madeleine said you wanted to zee me.”

Clark said, “Yes m. D’Arnet . . .”

M. D’Arnet interrupted him at this point, “Sil vous plait to you I am simply Jacques.”

“Merci. Jacques this will be a long story. Please sit down and be comfortable. We ask that everything we tell you be kept in absolute confidence. Our one exception of course would be Madam D’Arnet. We believe that she at least suspects the truth already.”

“The first thing you need to know is that we are not what we appear to be. We are actually newspaper reporters working for the Daily Planet in Metropolis. We are here undercover on an assignment. We are investigating illegal gun shipments into the Congo destined for delivery to the rebels in the Bantu country. We are not married, and our names are not Charles and Linda King. Please allow me to introduce Lois Lane, and I am Clark Kent. We actually have a rather simple request. We are in love with one another and wish to be married. We would like you to perform the ceremony. We would also like Madam D’Arnet to be a witness. If there is need of another, we would like Dr. M’benga. For reasons of security we request that afterward the records be sealed.”

“Madeleine had told me zum of ziss. She ees very intuitive about zeez matters. Eet would be my pleasure to perform a marriage ceremony for my friends, and rest assured zat zee records weel be seal’ed for as long as you desire. I weel obtain zee correct papers and return zis afternoon wiss Madeleine. A second witness weel not be necessary.” He rose from the chair leaned over Lois and kissed her on the cheek. He then turned and extended his hand to Clark. Clark shook his hand and thanked him.

After he left Clark turned to Lois and asked, “Do you trust me?”

With a somewhat quizzical expression on her face and she said, “Clark, I trust you with my life. If I can trust you with that, what couldn’t I trust you with?”

A very serious expression overtook his normal smile and Clark said, “I accept that trust willingly. As long as there is life in my body, no more serious harm will ever befall you. I’ll see to that. What I’m talking about right now isn’t such a weighty matter. Do you trust me to pick out a dress for you for this afternoon? I want to get you something pretty to wear for our wedding. I also want you to know that this will only be the first one. I intend for us to have a big wedding when we return to Metropolis. I want you to have that. I’m sure that your family would like that. Your sister would want to be your maid of honor, and your father wants to give you away.”

“Oh, Clark, that is so sweet of you. Yes, I trust your judgment. You did pick me after all didn’t you? How do you know about my sister and my father?” <I’ve never mentioned my family. One more mystery for him to explain.>

Clark said, “Lois, Honey, you don’t know the half of it. You will though, very soon. I want us to have some time together after you’re out of the hospital, and we’ll have some long talks. There

is so much I need to tell you.” As he finished speaking, he noticed a startled expression come over her face.

She was somewhat choked up when she asked, “What did you just call me?”

“What? Uh, Lois.”

“No, the other.”

“Uh, Honey.”

“Yes, that’s it. You called me Honey. No one has ever called me anything other than Lois except my father and Perry White.” She started to cry. “They are both father figures. It’s different coming from you. No one has ever thought enough of me to call me by anything but my name before. I never knew until now just how much I’ve missed that. It’s such a little thing, a term of endearment, but no one has ever had enough feeling for me to use one until now. I love it, and I love you for it.”

Clark leaned in and put his arms around her and hugged her as she quietly cried. He gave her a kiss on the forehead and said, “Lois, Honey, you’re going to just have to get used to hearing those from me because you’re going to be hearing them a lot. I’ll never get tired of calling you Honey or Sweetheart or any number of pet names.” <I never would have believed this. How could she have gone all her life till now and no one called her by a pet name or used an endearment? How? I guess that no one has loved her the way I do. That just makes me love her that much more.> “I hate to leave you, but I have some shopping to do.”

With tears still in her eyes she looked up at him and said, “I’ll be OK till you get back. Bring me something pretty.”

Clark leaned in and kissed her again and said, “Nothing can be as pretty as you, but I’ll try to find something that will gild the lily.” He gave her a smile and left.

Calling the hotel concierge Clark asked for the address of the most expensive couturier in Brazzaville. The address wasn’t that far from the hospital, so it only took a few minutes to drive over. When he entered the shop, a shop girl approached and asked if she might be of assistance. After describing the type of dress he was after and Lois’ size, she led him to an alcove off to one side. These were the ‘originals’ for which the shop was famous. The girl selected a white satin gown with a fitted top and full skirt which could almost pass for a formal wedding gown in Lois’ size with matching pumps. He paid for it and had everything packaged. Next he went out and bought a Tux.

The jeweler had notified him the previous day that the set was ready, so he went to the shop and picked up the set he had commissioned. When he arrived in the shop, the jeweler presented him with an over-sized jewelry box covered in dark blue velvet. Inside the box on a bed of pure white velvet, the jewelry was laid out. It was stunning, far exceeding his expectations. Jean-Luc was very proud of the work he had done. He pointed out to Clark that the gem he had supplied was a very unusual sapphire.

He said, “Normal-ly zee asterism of zee star sapp’ire ees caus-ed by rutile in zee matrix; ‘owever, ziss sapp’ire in fact ‘as zee double asterism, a twelve pointed star instead of zee normal six. Ziss leads me to believe zat ziss ees a never before seen variety of sapp’ire. Zere ees anozairr oddity ... observe.” He hit a switch which killed the shop lights. When he did, Clark was able to see the jewels glow slightly, a gentle lambent radiance flickering over the surface causing the asterism to glow with more than the reflected light which would be expected. He turned the lights back on. “Eef you recall, I zaid zat zee density or molecu-lar weight was wrong. Zay did not exactly match zee known values for zee Sapphire or zee Star Sapphire. I cannot identify what material ees causing zee double asterism. It ‘as to be zum unknown chemical element. Whatever eet ees, eet must also be responsible for zee glow.”

Clark looked at it with his microscopic vision but could not magnify it enough to make any kind of determination.

The jeweler said, “I am tres happy wiss zee results of ziss work. Zee resulting gems in zee necklace and zee tiara each dwarf zee Black Star of Queensland een size. You really should notify zee Gemological Zociety of ziss find. Ziss gem ees fabulous ... unique ... ‘istorical! I ‘ave nevair zeen anysang like eet, and I feel certain zat I never weel again. Where did you find zis gemstone? What ees eets country of origin? You must give ziss set a name. What are you going to call zis gem?”

Clark still wanted to keep a ‘low profile’ and keep this out of the papers, so he continued to demur. Clark said, “I’m afraid that I must keep that information to myself; after all if its origin were to become generally known, others might make their way into the market and that would decrease its value. As to a name, let’s see,” he gave it some thought. “How about the ‘Double Star of the Congo’? After all this is where it was discovered for what it is. Thank you for all your hard work, and I promise that I will mention the name of your shop if anyone inquires.” Clark had noticed a jewel which he hadn’t requested. Unsure as to how it would be received he removed it from the case. In view of her injuries which should probably result in significant scarring of her abdomen, he didn’t think a belly button jewel would be wise. He didn’t think that she would want to be wearing anything with a bare midriff in the future.

The jeweler had a thoughtful expression as he rolled around the suggested name in his head. Slowly a smile took over and then with satisfaction in his voice he said, “Zee Double Star of zee Congo, I like eet. Yes, zee Double Star of zee Congo eet shall be. Zank you.” With deep appreciation he took Clark’s hand and shook it.

Clark asked, “Were there any remnants from the cutting and polishing process? I may wish to have them analyzed at a later date.”

“Of course mon ami. Zair are always remnants. I will place zem een a small container pour vous.”

“Please keep some of the larger remnants for yourself.”

“Zank you. I weel place zem een a clear container and add eet to zee photographs.”

After receiving the requested materials, Clark again thanked the jeweler and left on the rest of his errands.

The next to last stop was the florist he had been frequenting where he bought a nosegay for Lois and a corsage for Madam D’Arnet to thank her for her understanding. Finally he then went by the hotel and retrieved some underwear for her from her luggage. After making all of these purchases, it was time to return to the hospital if Lois was to be able to dress.

When he got back to the hospital, Lois was sitting on the edge of her bed. She looked adorable even in a hospital gown. He asked her, “Do you want me to call a nurse to help you get dressed?”

With a sly grin on her face she said, “Not yet. Let me see what you got first.” Her grin became more mischievous. “Maybe I’ll have ***you*** help me dress.”

Clark got a mock shocked expression on his face and said, “You know I can’t do that! It’s bad luck for the groom to see the bride in her gown before the ceremony.”

She gave him a slap on the arm and chuckling said, “I didn’t know you were so superstitious.”

Laughing he replied, “Really, I’m not. I just think that there are some traditions that need to be honored. There are some other wedding traditions that I think I would like to follow also.” With this he pulled out a rather large velvet box. Clark said, “I’ll give you a hint. There is a saying that they use about the bride in a wedding.” <You’re going to be a lovely bride. ***My*** bride. ***My*** Lois.>

She asked, “Do you mean ‘Something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue?’”

With a smile on his face as Clark said, “Yep, that’s the one.”

Lois thought, <What could this be? It looks like an oversized jewelry box.> “OK, so what is this?”

“This will fulfill two of the categories, something new and something blue. Go ahead and open it and see.” He handed it to Lois.

With some trepidation she opened the lid and as she did so, she let out a long gasp. It was absolutely gorgeous. She said, “Oh ... My ... God! It’s the most beautiful blue Star Sapphire set I have ever seen! How did you know that this is my birthstone? These are too much. They look like they belong on a queen. I can’t wear them!”

The necklace was a mesh of gold chains with sapphires at all of the intersections around the central stone tapering from a six inch width at the center describing a half moon to a single chain on each side with an eight hundred carat central stone. The surrounding stones decreased in size from fifteen carat immediately around the central stone to half carat where the necklace tapered to a single chain. The ear rings were for pierced ears and were five carat stones on gold posts. The ring was also a five carat stone. The bracelet was a solid gold filigree cuff bracelet with a single one hundred carat stone mounted. The anklet was of similar design to the necklace but a single width with a ten carat central stone and half to one carat stones all around. The tiara was the pièce de résistance; it was of gold filigree matching the cuff bracelet with a central stone of one thousand carats. It would have been suitable in any set of crown jewels in the world.

As he removed the necklace from the box and clasped it about her neck, Clark said, “I had them specially made for you, and I want you to wear them at least on special occasions, and today is a ***very*** special occasion. I want everyone to know that you’re the queen of my heart. You can wear the tiara in place of a veil.”

Next he picked up the package with the dress in it. “I hope you like this.” Clark then took the dress out of its wrappings and held it up.

Lois reached out and touched it and gave an “ooooohhh” sound and said, “It’s ... lovely! It looks expensive! How can you afford such expensive gifts?”

Clark replied, “The expense doesn’t matter. What matters is that you’re dressed appropriately.” As he handed her a small bag he said, “Here are your undergarments.”

She took the bag and looked in. What she saw was something of a shock. These were her things. She had left them on the Ubuntu when they had gone into the interior. <How did he get these things? I was expecting to have to get something new for when I was to be discharged. That’s another mystery.>

Clark said, “Okay, you have something new, something blue, your ‘old’ underwear; you just need to borrow something from someone. Now I think I’ll call the nurse to help you dress. Jacques and Madeleine should be here shortly.” He reached over and hit the nurse call button. When she arrived, Clark asked if she would be so kind as to assist Mrs. King to dress. She said that she would do so gladly and he left.

Clark quickly changed into the tux and waited in the lobby for the nurse to leave the room. While he was waiting, Jacques and Madeleine arrived. Clark presented the corsage to Madam D’Arnet, and Jacques pinned it on her. They chatted for a few minutes, and then the nurse stepped out of the room and beckoned to them. Clark asked that Madeleine go in first to make sure she was ready and then come and get Jacques and him.

Madeleine entered the room and was in there for several minutes before she opened the door and called them. When she had first entered, Lois had asked her if she could borrow her handkerchief, and Madeleine had happily handed it to her. Lois smiled; she had fulfilled the tradition’s requirements, and she knew that Clark would be pleased. The last thing Madeleine had

done for Lois was to help her with her necklace. The sapphire set made a dramatic contrast against the white of her dress.

When Jacques and Clark entered, Clark was almost moved to tears at the sight. She was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen in his life. On her the gown looked magnificent. She was standing there, very demurely, holding the nose gay in front of herself looking very regal. Clark thought, <The tiara is perfect. She looks every bit the royal princess.> Madeleine stood by her side.

Jacques walked up to Lois and gave her a kiss on the cheek and said, “You look very lovely, my dear. Clark is a very lucky man.”

Lois blushed and said, “Thank you. You are too kind.”

Jacques got down to business. He said to Clark, “Please to stand next to Lois.” Clark moved over and Jacques began the standard ceremony. They had decided to use the rings that they had chosen for their undercover personas as their actual wedding rings, so these were exchanged. At the conclusion Madeleine gave both Lois and Clark kisses on the cheek. Jacques shook Clark’s hand, and then he kissed the bride. He filled out the papers which they signed, and Jacques and Madeleine departed.

Clark was dazed. It was done! Lois, his Lois was now ***really*** his Lois. There were so many things to tell her and so many things to show her. First though she needed to finish healing. He said, “I don’t think you want to get back into bed wearing that gown. Should I call the nurse to help you get back into the hospital gown?”

With a slightly shy expression on her face Lois said, “Why do we need a nurse? You’re my husband now.”

With her statement a light went on in his head. “Hey, that’s right. **I** can help my wife change. It will be my pleasure to help my wife change. I can’t say that enough.”

“What, help her change?”

“No, wife, I can’t say wife enough. My ***wife***! I want to shout it from the rooftops! Lois Lane is my wife! Look out world! I have it on good authority that there is nothing in the world that the team of Lois Lane and Clark Kent can’t do. Just look at what we have accomplished so far. I think we have enough on this story to go to print, but we have to wait on that for just a bit.”

“Why wait?” she asked.

“I still have to check on a few things.” He replied, “Right now we need to get you back into bed so that you can heal.” As he was saying this he was unzipping the back of her gown. She stepped out of it, and he neatly laid it out on the chair so that he could repackage it and then take it to the hotel. She was standing there in her bra and panties. Admittedly they covered more than the string bikini had, but these were not bathing apparel. These were lingerie. All he could do when he turned around from arranging the gown on the chair was to stare at her.

Closing the distance between them she reached behind and unclasped her bra and shrugged out of it. She placed it on the chair with the gown. Clark was frozen in place. She turned to him and said, “I’m yours now, so you’re allowed to touch me. In fact I would like you to touch me.” He reached out and placed his hand on her breast. She gave a sigh of contentment and leaned her head back silently asking to be kissed. As he kneaded her breast he took her up on her silent offer and leaned in and claimed her lips in a kiss. After several minutes of this they broke from the kiss. He put her hospital gown back on her and carried her over and put her in the bed. She marveled at this display of strength but didn’t mention it. He said he would tell her everything, soon. She gave a contented sigh and reached out with her hand to stroke his face. He took her hand in his and kissed the palm and said, “You get some rest. I’m going to check on some things. I’ll be back for visiting hours. You’ve had a big day, and you need to rest. We want to be able to have you discharged as soon as

possible.”

She said, “Dr. M’benga said that it should only be a couple more days.”

After giving her another kiss he said, “That’s terrific news. I’ll have the suite ready for you when they do, and then we can start our life together. I’ll be back in a little while.”

There had been this nagging feeling at the back of his mind that this was in fact a major change in history. Lois was alive. They were married. The investigation was more or less complete. There were just a few loose ends to tie up, and it would be ready to publish. But he knew that in his time the story never went to press. He needed to figure this all out. He needed to find out just how profound this change was, if it was a change. <I wish Herb was here. He would be able to tell me just what effect these changes have actually had. I know he said that he believed that whatever actions I would take were just part of the history that I knew, but how can this be explained? In my time Lois was missing and presumed dead, and the story was never filed; now neither of those is the case.>

Chapter 23 — A Bedtime Story

Later that same day

Clark headed for the Planet office. When he arrived, he was greeted by Derek. “Charlie, we haven’t seen you in a couple of weeks. Where’s Linda?”

Clark responded, “Oh, Derek, I’m sorry. Things have been really crazy the last couple of weeks. Linda is in the hospital because she was shot by one of the rebels. She is going to be fine; they’re going to discharge her in a couple of days. I should have come by and let you know, but I’ve been spending all my waking hours at her bedside. I’m sure you understand.”

Derek replied, “Shot by one of the rebels? How badly was she injured? What happened? Give me some details. I’m sorry to hear it, and I’m glad to hear that she is going to be okay, but please fill me in.”

“Well, Derek, she was shot at close range with a handgun. I got her to a doctor just in time. They had to operate, and she lost her spleen and a kidney, but she is recovering nicely. She is in room 105 if you want to send flowers or visit or whatever; I’m sure she’d like to see you.”

Derek said, “I think I’ll send some flowers from the Planet.”

Clark said, “That would be a nice gesture. I’m sure she would appreciate it. Uh, Derek, could I have that roll of film back? Now that we’re back from the interior, we can secure it.”

Derek walked over to his desk and reaching to the far back of his second drawer retrieved the canister and handed it to Clark aka Charlie.

“Thanks, we appreciate you babysitting this film for us. This is our evidence on the gun running.”

“I figured that out when you gave it to me. How goes the investigation? Getting anywhere?”

“I think we have just about wrapped it up. We won’t be able to publish until we at least are back in the states though.”

“Okay, I look forward to reading it when it’s published. Can you give us a heads up?”

“I’ll do that. I have some things I need to check on, so I’ll be using the computer for a while.” With that statement Clark then went over and logged onto the internet and made a query. He checked for any records regarding Lana Lang and also Clark Kent in Smallville. <Let’s see how much information I can find on myself and Lana. I was just completing my senior year at Midwestern. Let’s see if my academic transcript is available.> He started digging. After a lot of searching on the web he couldn’t find anything. He changed tracks and looked up the Registrar’s phone number, and after clearing it with Derek, he gave them a call. What he found was startling.

First he identified himself and explained where he was and

gave them a story about being called out of the country on an emergency. They told him that it was a good thing he had called in as he was going to be given incompletes for all of his classes since he hadn’t taken his finals. He thought, <What’s the story here? I *never* missed an exam. That is not the way things were. This change to history looks like it’s more profound than Herb or I could have imagined.> Based on what the Registrar’s office had told him, he called the Kansas City Police Department and identified himself. When he gave his name he was immediately transferred to the detective division. He spoke with a Sergeant Friday in missing persons. He explained that he had been called out of the country suddenly but would be returning soon. He was informed that Lana Lang had filed the report. He thanked the sergeant and asked that the missing person report be cancelled. He was informed that that could not be done until he came in, in person, for a positive ID or the person filing the report called in to close it. He promised to have Lana call and cancel the report.

In his conversation with the Registrar’s office, he found that he had not signed in for classes in the last couple of weeks. <The date I stopped attending classes is the date Lois was shot! That has to be more than coincidence.>

When he had talked to the police, he found that the report was filed by Lana Lang on May 25. He thought, <Is this the result of changing history this way? Let’s see about Lana.>

He typed in a few more commands and got the information he was looking for. <Lana is still in Smallville. Here is her phone number. I think I need to call her and have her call off the search.> He asked Derek permission to make another trans-Atlantic call. Derek approved it so he placed the call. “Hello, Lana.”

“Clark, where are you? I’ve been frantic!”

“Lana, it’s a long story. I’m in Africa.”

“How did you get there, and why are you there?”

“I came here on a rescue mission. Please cancel the Missing Person report. Tell the KC Police that you have spoken to me and that everything is fine.”

“Okay, I’m just happy you’re alright. I didn’t know what had happened. You didn’t get there by you know how did you?”

“Lana, it’s a long story. A lot of things have changed since we last talked. Our relationship has changed. I don’t want to talk about it over the phone. We’ll talk when I get back.”

“What do you mean ‘our relationship has changed’? Are you going to start doing you know what even though I don’t want you doing it?”

“Lana, I have come to the decision that I need to be who I am. To deny what I can do is not good.”

“Clark, they will put you away in a lab and study you like a monkey!”

“No, they won’t! Look, we can talk after I’m home.”

“When will that be?”

“It won’t be for a few weeks yet. I’m not exactly sure when.”

“Look, I’ve made it perfectly clear that I will not have you doing you know what if we have a relationship. You need to decide is it going to be me or you know what.”

“Look, Lana, I don’t want to hurt you, but I just can’t deny what I am any longer.”

“In that case don’t bother to come back. Just stay where you are, and do you know what where I don’t have to watch them haul you away. I couldn’t bear it. Good bye, Clark.” She hung up the phone without even giving him a chance to reply.

He thought about the conversation he had just had. It was with a sense of relief that he thought, <Well, that didn’t exactly go the way I had planned it, but at least this way I don’t have to tell her about Lois. I guess she’ll find out soon enough though. We do have to go to Smallville, and you can’t hide something like that in a small town.>

Shifting to the other topics he thought, <It looks like when I

changed history the other me ceased to exist. Nothing that happened in the last five years has happened. I have a chance to do it over, with Lois by my side. Wow, this is too much.>

<I need to salvage my academic career if I want to get that job at the Planet. In order to do that I'll need to contact the registrar and make arrangements to make up the exams. I've already told them I was called out of the country on an emergency.> He logged off the computer and went back to the hospital.

When Clark arrived at the hospital, he found Lois asleep. He didn't want to wake her so he moved the chair over next to her bed and sat in it with her hand in his and thought about his discoveries.

<OK, I'm now the ***only*** Clark Kent in this time period. I need to try to find out exactly what time my other self disappeared, if it happened in front of other people that could be a problem. If he was alone in his dorm room, then it should be OK. The exact time will also tell me what event triggered the change. Let's see ... I was in my senior year. It was a Saturday. I didn't have any classes. I would have had something to eat and gone back to the dorm to study. Unless it happened mid afternoon, I should have been alone. I would have been calling Lana around 8:00 PM for our weekly call. The date on the Missing Person report was May 25. That means I missed the call. Lana must have tried to find me, and when she couldn't, she filed the report. I disappeared sometime before 8:00 PM, May 24, 1992, that narrows it down somewhat. It must have something to do with what happened to Lois. If she had died, would things have continued on as they were? Herb is the only one that can tell me, and he won't be here until February 28th. According to him, this shouldn't have happened, so I'll need to figure this out without him. Let's see, I have used virtually all of my powers since that time and I have them all.>

His thoughts suddenly moved onto another track. <Five years to do over, and if this is the kind of change I think it is, I can have my life back with no Tempus to expose me. How did Clark maintain his secret? Let's see, he wore glasses when he was not in the suit, slicked back his hair when in the suit, and had a different attitude. Is that what he depended on? I can't understand how he does it, and yet he seems to have carried it off for a while now and no one the wiser. I'll have to talk it over with Lois after I've explained everything. I still feel like I would need a mask, but Clark seems to think that a mask would be counterproductive. What about the Lone Ranger, he was a good guy, and he wore a mask. I think people can get used to it, but this'll have to be a joint decision, I'm not alone anymore.> He got a smile on his face. <Mmmmm I'm ***not alone anymore!*** Lois>

Clark looked up and noticed that Lois was looking at him. "Hi, I didn't know you were awake."

"You looked like you were a million miles away."

"A million miles and five years to be exact."

<There's that five year period again. What does he mean? I'm starting to think it isn't figurative.> "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes, just be patient with me for a few more days. Once you're out of here, we can start working on our new life together."

"OK, but you know I hate mysteries. I always found my Christmas presents and opened them early."

With a wicked little grin on his face, he said, "I'm going to ask you to be as patient as I am. I'm going to wait to open my present."

With a bantering tone she replied, "Is it all wrapped up and have a bow on it?"

"I don't know. Let me see." He stood up and looked at the top of her head. "No, I don't see any."

Lois laughed and said, "I'll have to see what I can do about

that."

He leaned in and half lifting her off the bed put his arms around her and kissed her. She in turn wrapped her arms around his neck. As the kiss continued one of her hands found its way into his hair and started playing with it. <So soft, I love the feel of his hair. I can't wait to get out of here.>

"Okay, how about this. I'll tell you a bedtime story. Earlier today I was glad I had ordered a tiara for you as part of the set. You looked just like a royal princess. So how about this, Once upon a time there was a very beautiful princess."

Lois clapped her hands and said, "I love this story already!"

He started again, "Once upon a time there was a very beautiful princess. She ruled in her domain and had many subjects, but she left them so that she could take a trip. This trip was going to be dangerous, and her father didn't want her to go, but she went anyway. In another realm there was a handsome prince. This prince was engaged to be married to a princess from his realm, however she wanted him to give up his power in order to marry her. Then a twin sister of the beautiful princess came into his life. She showed the prince how he could use his power for the good of all the people. He thought that he now loved the beautiful princess' twin and wanted her to stay with him. When his fiancée found out that he would not give up his power, she called off the wedding. The twin of the beautiful princess then returned to her realm. The prince was then alone and very lonely until one day a wonderful wizard came to him and proposed that he help him find the beautiful princess, not the twin. The prince was very happy when the wizard offered his help, and the handsome prince took him up on his offer. They entered his magic carriage and flew to where the beautiful princess was going to be, and he waited for her to appear. When she did, they had an adventure together. After the adventure they were married and lived happily ever after. There, did you like that story?"

"I'm a little confused with all these princesses running around all over the place."

Laughing he replied, "You can't tell the princesses without a score card. I'll give you a little hint. You are ***the*** beautiful princess. I'm going to let you try to figure the story out. After you're discharged and we are in our suite, if you haven't figured it out, then I'll explain. Right now it's time for me to leave and for you to get your beauty sleep." With that he put his arms around her, hugged her and gave her a kiss. He then said goodnight and left promising to return in the morning.

Chapter 24 — Together At Last

June 4, 1992 AM

The next morning Clark brought an outfit in for her to wear when she was discharged. It was a good thing that he had because when he arrived he found Dr. M'benga in Lois' room. Lois held out both arms to him and said, "I'm free! Dr. M'benga has released me!"

"That's terrific news. Dr. M'benga I want to thank you for the excellent care you have given my wife. I feel certain that if it hadn't been for you, I would have lost her."

Dr. M'benga replied in a very humble tone, "I have just been doing my job and am happy to have been of assistance. I will send an orderly around in a while with a wheelchair, but I'll give you time to get dressed before he arrives. Just have the nurse call him when you are ready; she will also go over the aftercare instructions with you."

They both replied, "Thank you doctor." And he left.

Clark placed her bag on the bed. She opened it and found more clothes that she knew that she had left on the Ubuntu. She said, "Clark, you're going to explain these, aren't you?"

Clark realized that he had been careless. He said, "I'll be explaining everything, shortly. Let's get you dressed so that we can get you out of here. Have you figured out the story I told you

yesterday?”

As she started pulling clothes out of the bag and laying it out preparatory to dressing, she answered, “No, not yet. You may have to explain it all.”

“I think that the first thing I’m going to do is take you out to lunch. You have been eating hospital food for too long.”

With a distinct look of pleasure on her face, she said, “Once again you’re a life saver. I love the way you think.” She turned around and presented her back to him. “Will you undo the ties at the back of this gown for me?”

With a grin on his face he moved over and started untying the gowns fastenings and said, “I think you’re going to learn that I’m always going to be willing and able to help my wife get undressed.”

Lois looked back over her shoulder at him and with a wicked little grin on her face said, “Something for me to look forward to.” She then shrugged out of the gown and turned to face him. All she had on was a pair of panties. She looked up at him and tilted her head back in silent invitation. He leaned in and claimed her lips in a kiss while his hands found their way to her breasts. Realizing that the sooner he got her dressed the sooner they could be in the suite, he released her after a quick caress and kiss and said, “Let’s get you dressed so that I can get you out of here.”

Clark helped her dress. She was still somewhat stiff and sore from the surgery and had to be careful of how she moved. The doctor had promised that this would pass fairly rapidly though. Until then she would have to exercise some caution. After she was dressed, Clark went to the nursing station and informed the nurse that she was ready to go. The nurse called for an orderly and then accompanied Clark back to room 105. Before the orderly arrived, the nurse went over the aftercare instructions with them. She gave them some dressing materials for changing the surgery dressings and told them what to watch for. When the orderly arrived with the wheelchair, Lois climbed aboard and was wheeled to the front door. Clark had parked the Land Rover near the door and went to fetch it. He loaded her things which included some of the flower arrangements and luggage in the back and then helped her get into the front.

Upon leaving the hospital, they went to Le Jardin which had become one of their favorite eating places in Brazzaville. Afterwards they went to the hotel. Lois was greeted courteously by the desk clerk who expressed his pleasure at seeing that she was out of the hospital. Clark asked that the bell boy bring the flower arrangements and luggage up to the suite and proceeded to the elevator with Lois. When they left the elevator, Clark opened the door to the suite and turned to Lois. “Can I carry my bride across the threshold?”

She looked at him with a shy grin on her face and asked, “Is this another one of those traditions that you feel compelled to follow?”

His reply was a simple, “Yes.”

He picked her up. Her head came to rest on his left shoulder and a memory indistinct at first but then becoming stronger by the second intruded. A memory of being carried this way by him after being shot but there had been wind blowing her hair around at the time. She remembered recovering consciousness several times while being carried this way. Then she thought, <He carried me this way all the way to Brazzaville after I was shot! How could that be? We were hundreds of kilometers from Brazzaville at the time.> She spoke up, “Clark, you carried me like this after I was shot, didn’t you?”

He continued to hold her and turned his head to look into her eyes and said, “Yes, I did.”

“All the way to Brazzaville?”

“Yes, all the way to Brazzaville. I had to get you there immediately. You were dying, and I couldn’t let that happen.”

“Just how long did it take?”

Clark carried her into the bedroom he added some pillows so that she was reclining rather than laying flat and laid her down on the bed.

Just then the bell boy arrived with the contents of the Land Rover. Clark saw to the disposition of the flowers, tipped the bell boy, and saw him out.

He returned to the bedroom and lay down next to her before he said, “This is a going to be a long story, and I was hoping to have some more time with you before we got into this, but some things have happened which make it necessary so here goes. You know my name is Clark Kent, Clark Jerome Kent, and I grew up in Smallville, Kansas. I was the adopted son of Jonathan and Martha Kent. They were killed in a car wreck when I was ten years old.”

“Oh, Clark, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right. It happened a long time ago.” It was so practiced it just slipped out of his mouth without thinking. So many people said that but in a rather patronizing fashion. But he realized not this time. When Lois said it, he felt as though she really meant it. He relented and said, “Thank you. You know, actually it did happen a long time ago, but it does still hurt. I mean, why did they have to die in something as senseless as a car crash? It happened just outside our property! Another hundred yards and they would have been safely off the road. I saw them die right in front of me, and there wasn’t anything I could do about it.”

Metaphorically shaking himself he returned to his original topic. “Sorry, I don’t mean to get all maudlin on you. Anyway, about Smallville, Kansas ... I grew up there, but I wasn’t born there.”

“Where were you born?”

“A long way away from there but I’ll talk more about that later. Do you remember the story I told you?”

“Yeah, it was rather confusing. You said I was the beautiful princess, and I assume that you are the handsome prince, but then you talked about the beautiful princess’ twin. I don’t have any twin.”

“This is going to be hard to explain. Please believe me that I am telling you the truth. I’m not feeding you a science fiction story. I’ll fill in some names so that it makes more sense.”

“Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess, Lois Lane by name, and she ruled in the domain of Metropolis, New Troy at the Daily Planet. She left there to take a trip to the Congo. She knew that the trip was going to be dangerous, and so did her father, Perry White, and he didn’t want her to go, but she went anyway. This all happened in 1992.”

“Yeah, it’s 1992. What’s so special about the date? Why mention it?”

Clark replied, “Please bear with me, and let me get back to the story. In another realm there was a handsome prince, Clark Kent by name. This prince was engaged to be married to another princess. Her name was Lana Lang whose domain was Smallville, Kansas. The handsome prince ruled in a domain far from Smallville, Kansas. His realm was in Metropolis, New Troy at the Daily Planet.”

“But, how could that be? I never met you until a couple of months ago.”

“Please be patient. This should make it clear. The handsome prince’s domain was the Daily Planet in ... 1997.”

Lois let out a gasp. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“Lois, I’m a time traveler. I came here from 1997 to find and rescue you. I was hired by Perry White in 1995 as a reporter on the city desk — your old job. You had never returned from the Congo. You were missing and presumed dead.”

Lois said in a somewhat musing tone, “Then that’s how you knew when I was to arrive. That also explains all those five year

references. To you it was history. Okay, if I'm missing and presumed dead in 1997, does that mean that I'm still going to die?

"I wasn't sure until a short time ago, but I *thought* we had changed history. But now actually I'm sure we *have* changed history. I've been checking on a few things while you were in the hospital. It would appear that the night you were shot I disappeared."

"That's funny. I can still see you."

"I mean my other self. When I came back in time to 1992, suddenly there were two of me in this time period. You see in 1992 I was finishing up my senior year at Midwest U. I have checked and the night you were shot I went missing. Lana Lang, my girlfriend at that time filed a missing person report after I missed our weekly call. That means that I'm the only me here now. Okay, so I'm from 1997 like I said."

"Lana is the other princess. Okay, so what about my twin. I don't have a twin, and if I'm missing and presumed dead for five years where did I, uh, she, come from?"

"Okay, I think we can dispense with the fairy tale now. There was a criminal running for political office in Metropolis. He was being opposed by Perry White. In order to win the election, he needed someone to be an enemy that he could 'rescue' the people from. He chose me to be the enemy, but in order to do this, he had to make me become a symbol to the people. For this he needed someone familiar with what I could become. His name was Tempus, and he was also a time traveler, but he was more than that, he was also a dimension traveler. He crossed the dimensional barrier and captured the Lois Lane from another dimension and brought her to this one. Tempus was sure that she would be able to convince me to be the symbol that the people needed, and she did."

"What kind of symbol did you become?"

"A symbol for truth, justice, and the American way to a city and country that had almost lost its way."

"Wow, that's a lot of responsibility. How do you handle it?"

"I'll handle it better now with you by my side."

"How? Am I that important? What makes me so special?"

"In order to explain that I need to ask you a question. Lois, what is the soul?"

"Wow, talk about changing the subject. Okay, well, let's see. Well, the soul is part of what we are."

"Lois, it goes a way beyond that. The soul is our essence. It is *what* we are. Our memories define *who* we are, but the soul defines *us*. The ancients had a theory that there were at least some souls that are split into two parts, and they cannot rest content until the two are reunited. Lois our souls, yours and mine, are two halves of a single whole. We are soul mates, and we are fated to be together." Clark reached out and grasped her hand. "That tingle you feel when we touch is a sign of the connection we share. I came back in time, but it wasn't to simply rescue a person that I should have been working with. I came back in time five years to rescue the one woman in the world who completes me. The only woman I can ever truly love."

Lois was blown away by this. "Wow, so you and I are meant to be together? I can't tell you how glad I am that you found and saved me. I'm so happy being here with you. There's still more though, isn't there?"

"Yes, a lot more. As I said, I have been checking up on current events, and I've confirmed that we have definitely changed history. Your survival was the key item causing that change. You were supposed to die from that gunshot wound, and when you survived, the other Clark vanished. I have a rendezvous scheduled for February of next year, but I don't think it's going to happen because of this change. At that rendezvous we were supposed to meet Herb Wells, and if we were together, he was going to take us back, in your case forward to 1997 so that we

could resume our lives from that point."

"Who's Herb Wells? That name sounds familiar somehow."

"Herbert George Wells is his full name, H. G. Wells."

"You mean the author, H. G. Wells? He died in 1946!"

"Yeah, I mean H. G. Wells. Herb is actually a time traveler. He brought me here in his time sled."

"Wow, this all sounds convincing, but so do a lot of science fiction stories. Time travel and dimension crossing and patriotic symbols, you are my husband now, and I know that I should believe you, but don't you think you're stretching the envelope a little? If I know Perry White, the last thing he would do is run for Mayor."

"The new owner of the Planet put him up to it."

"Wait a minute, the Planet changed hands?"

"Yeah, in 1996, anyway, as I was saying, I don't think that moving forward to 1997 is going to be feasible at this point. Since my other self has disappeared, I'm going to have to step in and finish my college degree so that I can get the job at the Planet. It looks like I have five years to relive, so as soon as you're healed, we'll need to return to the states so that I can take some make-up exams and finish the term."

"Oh, and here's another change. In my time this story is never filed. I think we have almost enough to publish. I would like to wait until I have completed my exams to file it. If we publish under a joint byline, Perry might hire me immediately. Let me tell you something about your twin. She did this story before she met her Clark. She and the Clark Kent of that dimension have been married for about a year and have been reporting partners for four years. They are billed by the Planet as 'The Hottest Team in Town'. They have multiple Kerth awards, both individually and as a team; Lois' first Kerth award was for this story. I'm convinced from how we have worked together on this investigation that we can also be 'the Hottest Team in Town.'"

"I'm willing if you are. I'm happy that we are partners now in more ways than one, both as a reporting team and as husband and wife."

Clark noticed that she was showing signs of fatigue. "Lois, why don't you take a nap? You look tired to me. After you get up, we can order dinner from room service and talk some more."

"Only if you will lay here and hold me."

"You've got a deal. I would like nothing better than to hold you for the rest of my life."

Clark went over to the dresser and pulled out the drawer where he had placed her pajamas and other night wear. "What do you want to wear?"

Lois got a quizzical look on her face. "The night shirt with the bunnies on it."

Clark pulled it out and walked over to her. She had started unbuttoning her top. He helped her finish and then unhooked her bra, and she shrugged out of it. She put her arms up and he slipped the garment over her arms and down. She then stood to remove her skirt. Clark took her clothes and folded them and placed them over a chair back. He then pulled back the covers so that she could get in bed. Clark went into the bathroom to do a quick wash up and changed into some sleep shorts. When he came out, she was sitting up against the pillows. When she saw him, she let out a small gasp. She hadn't seen him in this little clothing since she had walked in on him in the clearing in front of the tent. He was a sight to behold, that physique, the well defined muscles in his arms, legs, and chest. She just wanted to run her hands over them again. The sudden realization hit her that there was absolutely nothing stopping her from doing just that. He was hers now after all. She patted the bed next to her and said, "Come join me big boy."

As he was lying down, she removed the pile of pillows so that she was laying flat. She turned toward Clark and said, "Come closer. I want you to hold me." He moved over and put an

arm under her, and she moved closer and laid her head on his shoulder and her right arm across his chest. She had never felt so secure and contented since that morning in the tent. She fell asleep almost immediately. Clark lay there awake just marveling at her presence watching her sleep. Eventually he dropped off to sleep also.

He awoke to the feeling of her hands on his body. He looked her in the eyes and said, “Do you think this is wise?”

She looked at him with obvious desire in her eyes and said, “You carried me across the threshold because it’s traditional. Well, I’ve got news for you, there is one tradition I don’t want to miss out on. This is my wedding night and I don’t want to miss out on any part of it. It’s past time that we made love. I’ll be on top, that way I can control what is happening, and if I find it’s too much, I can stop.”

“Lois, I need to tell you something. I’ve never done this before. I hope I don’t disappoint you.

Lois let out a small gasp at this statement and asked, “You’ve never made love to a woman before?”

“Honest, I haven’t. I was waiting for the right woman, and you know who that is. I did have some experience with Lana and Mayson, you know some petting and such, but we never went ‘all the way’, and there was that trick that Suzanne and Colette played on me that I told you about.

“Well, I’ve got a confession to make to you. I’ve never done this either. In the past all my failed relationships failed because I wouldn’t go all the way with the guy I was with. When I wouldn’t go there, the guys I was interested in started calling me frigid, a lesbian or ...” a really sarcastic tone entered her voice as she finished, “and I really liked this one, ‘The Ice Queen’, just because I wouldn’t have sex with them. Oh we did the petting thing too, but I was waiting until I was serious about someone. It looks like we’re a matched set. In view of this I think we need to make this very special for both of us. Do you think we can do it? I for one don’t want to wait any longer. Let’s try.” So saying she squirmed out of her underpants and removed her night shirt. She had already released him from his sleep shorts, but she now pushed them down. He finished removing them and lay back down. She leaned in, and they started kissing, a deep full kiss of soul shattering proportions. Lois experienced that blissful haze she had been in on previous occasions, but this time she had an object in mind, and a kiss, no matter how wonderful, was not going to satisfy her.

This started a period of marital intimacy after which Lois lay down flat on his chest stretched her legs out on top of his and promptly fell asleep. Clark’s hands continued to explore her body for a time, and then he too fell asleep.

Some time later in the afterglow of their lovemaking, Lois was still groggy with sleep and lying on his chest when she reached over with her leg preparatory to rolling off of him. When she did, her leg didn’t find anything to rest on. She straightened her leg and started questing with it for the bed, but it was nowhere within reach. This fact slowly filtered its way into her consciousness and she opened her eyes. She looked over his shoulder expecting to see that they had moved to the very edge of the bed and that her leg was dangling over the side. Her eyes opened very wide as she said in a less than calm voice, “Clark. *Clark. * **Clark**!” He finally awoke. “She looked him in the eyes because she was afraid to look anywhere but at him right then and said, “Clark, we’re floating five feet above the bed! How can this be????”

Chapter 25 — Revelation

June 4, 1992 nighttime

Since Lois had brought Clark to full wakefulness, they suddenly plummeted down to the bed, which almost broke under the impact. Lois was looking at him as she said, “How did you

do that??? It *was* you, *wasn’t it*?”

With a sheepish look on his face Clark said, “I hadn’t gotten to that part of the story yet.”

Lois said, “Okay give. How did you do that? I didn’t see any wires.”

“No, no wires. Just me.” Clark looked out the window and saw that it was dark outside. “I need to clean up because I still carry the evidence of your gift. I can’t tell you how much I love you for that. Then we need to get dressed, and then I’m going to show you something.” He went over to the dresser and closet and pulled out his and hers dark outfits and then helped her get dressed before he cleaned up and changed into his outfit.

They exited the suite, and he led her to the roof. Since darkness had already fallen, Lois looked around at the skyline and the lights of the city. “It’s pretty up here.”

While Lois was looking around and drinking in the scenery, Clark began to tell her his story.

“Alright, let’s recap. I’m from the future. I came back in time to rescue you from being killed by the rebels. Now comes the hardest part of the story. I told you that I grew up in Smallville, Kansas, but that’s not where I was born. Lois, I’m going to be telling you some things now that you’re going to find harder to believe than my being a time traveler. Lois, I’m not from here.”

“I knew that, you said you were from Kansas.”

“No, I mean I’m not from *here* here ... the *Earth*.”

Lois laughed, “Not from around here meaning the Earth. If you’re not from here, then how did we just have such a wonderful time making love? It was my very first time, and I actually felt that it was a lot more than just sex. We make *love*, and it’s fantastic.”

“Lois, not all extra-terrestrials are little green men or bug eyed monsters,” Clark continued. “Because I’m not from around here, there are things that I can do that are beyond what normal men can do.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you are better at sex than normal men because you’re not from around here? I really have no basis for comparison, but if I did, I might still agree with you. What we do together is super!”

“Well, I don’t know if that is a power or if that’s just us being meant for each other, but you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.” He wrapped his arms around her and gently floated them up higher and higher.

Lois went rigid in his arms for a few seconds and then relaxed. She asked, “Clark, you’re doing this, right?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Good because I didn’t want to think I was seeing things. This is how you got me to Brazzaville and the hospital, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I couldn’t let you die because I was afraid to reveal what I could do.”

“Let’s go back down. I want you to carry me the way you did when you carried me across the threshold.” Clark descended just as gently as he had ascended until they were back on the roof. She turned toward him and placed her arms around his neck. He placed an arm behind her back and another under her knees and lifted her into his arms. She felt a gentle breeze on her face as he took off straight up. She had been looking at his face the entire time. When he stopped ascending, she looked around. When she looked down, she saw Brazzaville spread out below her, all the lights looking like a field of sparkling jewels. “Clark, this is wonderful! I love it! It feels so free, no motors, no wings, no flight attendants, nothing but you and me. How do you do it? Is this how you got my clothes from the Ubuntu?”

“Yes, it is, but Lois, this isn’t the only thing I can do.”

“Wow, you mean that there is more!” Lois felt like she was a kid again, and she had just gotten a present. She couldn’t wait to see all of it. “What else can you do?”

“I can hear your heartbeat across a crowded room and know that it’s yours. It must be part of the soul mates thing. From the

moment you got off the plane, I have been able to hear your heartbeat. It reassures me that you're okay when I can hear it. Even when you were in room 503, I could hear it through the walls. I fell asleep to that comforting sound."

"That's so sweet. Okay, you can fly, you can hear my heartbeat. What about other things, can you hear things besides my heart?"

"Oh, yes, I can hear almost everything; it's just that your heartbeat is special. I can see things at great distances, see through solid objects, and start fires with my eyes. I have very strong lungs and can use my breath to chill things. I used it on your hands at the port so that they wouldn't blister. I can move very fast, I'm very strong, and I can't be hurt except be one thing."

With childlike exuberance she said, "Wow, all of that? When can you show me some of them?"

"I think that this is enough for one night. Let's go back have dinner and go to bed."

She chuckled as she replied, "Okay, but I'm going to have a hard time sleeping. I feel like it's Christmas Eve, and I've got presents to open." She tightened her arms around his neck to pull herself up so that she could give him a kiss. The kiss deepened, and they were both so involved in it that Clark lost his concentration until he felt that they were falling out of the sky. The kiss was broken and so was their fall. He smiled at her in apology and directed their path back to the hotel roof. They landed safely and returned to their room, ordered room service, and settled in for the evening.

It had been a very eventful day. True to her word Lois had a hard time falling asleep. They lay for a time in each other's arms. Lois said, "Do you think you need to check the dressing? Our earlier activity ..."

To facilitate this he helped her remove her nightshirt. As she lay there in just her panties Clark checked the dressing in a rather cursory way but continued to stand there enjoying the view. "You look just fine to me."

With a mischievous look and an arched eyebrow she asked, "Are you commenting on the surgery site?"

With an equally mischievous look he replied, "I think *you* look just fine."

Rather than immediately replacing her nightshirt Lois took his hands and brought them to her breasts. She said, "Just how fine do you think I look?"

"You are the finest woman I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. I couldn't help falling in love with you, you're so fine."

His hands on her breasts felt so good, she let out a contented sigh and said, "Do you think a little exercise would tire me out so that I could sleep?" In response Clark lay down next to her as he continued to fondle her breasts. They started kissing, and she was enjoying it until suddenly his lips left hers. She felt bereft until she then felt his lips at the side of her face and then her ear as he kissed it and then sucked on and nibbled her earlobe before he moved to the side of her neck. He left a trail of kisses from the side of her neck down across her collarbone and on down along the side of her breast. As he was doing this, she felt like she should be purring like a cat.

When they came up for air she said, "Make love to me, Clark."

He complied with her request, and after their intimacy as she was yawning, she thought, <Wow, talk about déjà vu. This was almost an exact replay of the dream I had while we were in that tent. I think I'll tell Clark about it later.> In the afterglow of their lovemaking, they both drifted off to sleep in each other's arms.

The next day they awoke in each other's arms, just the way they had fallen asleep. Lois felt more rested than she had since she was shot. Clark was already awake and with a smile on his

face said, "Good morning wife."

She smiled back at him and replied, "Good morning husband. I feel wonderful today. Are you sure that one of your powers isn't making me heal more quickly? I feel like since you picked me up I have made more progress healing than I did my last week in the hospital."

"I don't think it is, but I do have an aura that surrounds my body. It helps protect me from harm, and it extends to anyone I'm in contact with. We haven't been apart since I picked you up except for some very brief times. Let's try an experiment. I'll hold you and cuddle you and kiss you and love you constantly until you're completely healed."

Lois with a dreamy look in her eyes and a smile on her lips said, "That sounds like the kind of experiment I would like to try. Come here and kiss me."

He scrunched down in the bed and started kissing her. After a few minutes they separated and he asked, "What do you want to do today?"

"I want you to tell me more of the story!"

"Let's order some breakfast from room service, and then I'll tell you some more."

While he was ordering the breakfast, he ordered a picnic lunch for later, and then he rejoined her in the bed.

"One of the questions I have had is where you're getting all your money?"

"Before Herb dropped me off in 1992, I took some time to mine some gold and jewels. The Sapphire set I gave you for your wedding present was one of the uncut gems I had mined. That is the ultimate matched set because it's all from one stone. I took it to the jeweler where we bought our rings and had the stone cut, polished, and mounted. I think he did a good job."

"Well, if you can do that, why work for the Planet?"

"It's a matter of philosophy. I don't feel that I have these powers so that I can benefit myself. I feel that I have them to help others. The only reason I did it this time was the importance of the mission, you. I needed to be free enough so that I could be ready when you arrived. Also in this time I don't have a source of income because I don't have a real job. I work for the Planet because I like to and I have a legitimate source of income. That is all changed now. Now I have a chance to start working for the Planet even sooner than I did. I need to tell you more of the story. In my time I was called Superman, and everyone knew that Clark Kent was Superman. If that was still the case, we would have had more difficulty being married than we will now. Since we have changed history, at this point there is no Superman, and no one knows that Clark Kent is he. We can be married as Lois and Clark and have a private life just as the other Lois and Clark do, and I can help out as Superman. We'll have to decide how to go about that. There are also advantages to working for the Planet. I have access to all the resources for research and early notification of problems which would require my intervention."

"I guess I can see that. It's nice to be actively employed. Besides I've kinda liked working with you as my partner. Just imagine how much easier our investigations will be with what you can do. No more fire escapes to the roof, you can just whoosh us up. No more fear of being caught because you can hear the security guard coming. The possibilities are endless."

Clark started to laugh, "You and the other Lois are like two peas in a pod. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were her."

"Well, is that a bad thing?"

"No, it makes you adorable. Your zest for life and your tenacity make you what and who you are. The woman I love. We'll have to discuss just how far we'll go utilizing my powers on an investigation though. There is another thing that we need to discuss. There is one thing that can hurt me. It's a substance called Kryptonite. I want to do something about it before I make my debut as Superman, but that is still in the future and comes

later in the story. Can you wait a bit?”

“Okay, I’ll wait, but I’m getting anxious to hear more.”

“Right now we need to concentrate on getting you well.”

“Alright, but I have another question. Why didn’t you use your powers on this investigation?”

“I did, you just didn’t know that I did. When you were falling off the hawser, I used superspeed to get to you and superstrength to pull you up. I used my superhearing to follow you by listening to your heartbeat while you were sneaking up on me.”

“So you knew I was there the whole time! You allowed me to ‘stick you up’ and then turned the tables on me with the Windmill. I should hate you for that. You know, you promised to go over that move with me, and you never did and see where that got me?”

“I apologize for that oversight. As soon as you are up to it, I will, just in case we are in that situation again, but in my own defense I’ll just say that I wasn’t going to presume to teach my Sensei.”

At that comment she couldn’t restrain her laughter. “With all that you can do, did you really need me to teach you?”

“Yes, I did, and I still do. You don’t know the extent of what I can do as yet, but when you do, I think you’ll see that learning control is very important. What you have taught me has helped. About that incident at the warehouse, it was the only way I could reveal myself to you so that I could work with you. Besides I think we both enjoyed that particular encounter.”

“My toes still curl when I think about it, which is often.”

“Ah, you see. It wasn’t wasted. To actually answer your question, before your arrival I had found and infiltrated the rebel camp. That was how I knew when the ship with the arms was to arrive.”

“Okay, so how can we use this knowledge to finish this investigation?”

“I really hadn’t given it much thought. What we need are names and maybe some pictures, right?”

“Yeah, that should wrap it up nicely. How can we get them?”

“Before you arrived I found a spot in the foothills near the camp where I could watch what was going on. I was able to fly in and hide while I listened in on their meetings.”

“What if you took a recorder with you and recorded a conversation about the illegal guns? That would finish it up nicely.”

“It’ll require a couple of days away? Will you be okay on your own?”

“Take me *with* you!”

“We’ll be hiding out in the foothills all day. Are you sure you want to do this?”

Lowering her voice until it took on a sultry tone Lois said, “It’ll be fun! You can fly us up there at night; we can take a picnic basket with us. It’ll be just the two of us, away from everybody and everything.”

Chapter 26 — A Surprise for Doctor M’benga

Two days later

“What do you want to do today? Would you like to go on a cruise and do a sun bath?”

“You brought the Ubuntu back?”

“Yes, I went and got it one night that you were in the hospital sleeping.”

“Wow, all that distance in one night. Did you pick it up and fly or what?”

“Well, I flew standing still. I’ll show you when we are on board. Right now I hear the breakfast wagon getting off the elevator.” To Lois’ astonished gaze he spun out of his sleep shorts and into jeans and a polo shirt. He went through the living room of the suite and answered the door just as the waiter knocked. He took the cart, tipped the waiter, and rolled the cart into the

bedroom where Lois was still on the bed.

“Do that thing again, this time into your shorts.”

Happy to oblige he spun out of the jeans and into his sleep shorts.

“Wow! How do you do that?”

Laughing he replied, “I had always gone into a closet or some secluded place to change until the last time I was with your twin. She explained how her husband did the spin change, so I tried it. It’s rather easy with practice. All you need is superspeed. Of course sometimes mistakes are made.” He spun back into his casual clothes. Then he spun back into his shorts only this time the shorts were missing in action, and he stood before her in all his naked glory. He looked down and said, “Oops,” and laughed. “You see. Sometimes I make mistakes.”

“As long as you only make that mistake in front of me, I won’t mind.” Licking her lips she said in a sultry tone. “Commere handsome.”

He levitated over and lay down next to her, and as soon as he hit the bed, she was on top of him. She laid out full length on top of his body, and with his assistance she divested herself of her nightshirt and then her panties.

After a period of intimacy she lay down on his chest while she recovered some of her strength. Slowly, almost imperceptibly Clark floated them off the bed, and her legs began to dangle down in free air. Lifting her legs up she placed them so that they lay atop his, and she was comfortable once more and with a small sigh rested her head on his chest and fell asleep.

After a time Clark woke her up and reminded her of breakfast. Floating back down to the bed, they finally separated so that they could eat.

As they were finishing up on breakfast, Clark with a serious look on his face asked, “Are you sure you’re not feeling any discomfort or pain from all this activity? Should we, you know, cut back some?”

“Clark, this is what people do on their honeymoon. We *are* newlyweds after all! I’m feeling great, and the activity is soooo enjoyable. I love you, and I want as much of you as I can have. Seriously, if I feel like it’s becoming too much, I’ll let you know, but so far there has been no pain, just a lot of pleasure. While we’re thinking of it, why don’t you check the wound site?”

Taking a peek under the dressing didn’t take long. In fact Clark decided that they could probably leave the dressing off as the wound appeared to have reached a point in the healing process that the protection offered by the dressing material was not needed.

“You know, I’m no doctor, but if you were to ask me from what I’m seeing, it looks like even the scarring is going away. If I didn’t know better, I’d say that once your healing is complete no one would ever know you had been injured. Your stomach will appear to be unblemished.”

They were both amazed at this and decided by mutual consent that the rate of healing was abnormal to say the least. It appeared as though over a week’s worth of body repair had been accomplished within the time they had been together since leaving the hospital. “The obvious conclusion is that your aura is in fact speeding up the healing process. Clark, if your aura can cause me to heal more rapidly and even remove the scarring, what else is it doing to me?”

“I don’t know, but I wouldn’t think it would be anything bad. This is a distinctly good thing. When I was growing up, I wound up with some cuts and scrapes before my invulnerability kicked in, and in all cases I healed without any scarring. I guess that was a result of the aura’s action on my body. I’m guessing that since we have been in almost constant contact and very intimate contact at that that my aura is acting on your body the same way as it does on mine. The other Lois and Clark haven’t mentioned any problems resulting from her exposure to his aura. It has to be

safe.” Clark got up off the bed and moved over to one of his bags and opened it. Reaching in he pulled out a small packet. Returning to the bed he held out his hand to her. “This is the final piece of the set. I had removed it from the case because of your injuries. Since it appears that you will not have any scarring as a result of your wound, I think I can give it to you now.”

Reaching out a tentative hand she took the packet and opened it. She gasped as she realized just what it was. Holding it by the clasp she raised it up in front of her eyes to get a closer look. “It’s beautiful! Was this also from that same stone?”

“Yes, that was the final piece. It’s a belly button jewel. In order for it to be seen you would need to have a bare midriff. Now that we’re pretty sure you will be without a scar you should be able to wear it.”

“You know, I hadn’t really thought about that; I had just been so happy to be alive and with you, I hadn’t worried about that.”

Clark went over and picked up the jewel box, and she placed the jewel in its depression in the velvet. She ran her hands over the various pieces thinking of how this set represented how he felt about her. She looked at him, <He called me the queen of his heart. He certainly treats me like a fairy tale princess. He is definitely my Prince Charming.> “Now the set is complete.” She said with a touch of awe in her voice. “It’s magnificent!”

Clark returned the jewel box to its place and returned to the bed. They returned to the interrupted discussion.

“This other Lois and Clark, you’re going to need to tell me more about them. How you met them and what you have done together. Wow, I just realized, all those stories you’ve been telling me, have you been doing any ‘super’ things while you were in all these different places?”

“Well, since you asked, yes, I did. Actually that was why I moved so much. Too many miraculous rescues in an area and people start to ask questions. When they did, I would move on. I’ll tell you about it later. Right now let’s go get the picnic basket and head out to the Ubuntu.”

They did just that. When they got to the Ubuntu, Clark took in the spring lines and Lois eased the boat out of the slip. She set course upstream, and they cruised for a couple of hours. They found a nice area and anchored.

Clark brought out the lunch and sat in one of the deck chairs. Lois sat in his lap and opened the basket. She started feeding both of them while Clark held her and stroked her body. The consumption of the lunch would occasionally be interrupted by some lengthy kissing sessions. It was a good thing that it was a cold lunch to start with.

After they finished lunch, Lois stood and slowly spinning around surveyed the horizon in a 360 degree arc. Determining that there were no other vessels in sight, she disappeared into the cabin. When she returned, she had her sun tan lotion and towel. Clark thought, <What’s wrong with this picture? I’ve got it! She’s still in jeans and a top. Why does she have the lotion and towel?>

Clark watched as she climbed up on the roof of the cabin. From this new elevation Lois did another slow 360 degree spin scanning the horizon, and when she was satisfied that they were alone, she beckoned Clark to join her. He floated up to the cabin roof and gave her a quizzical look.

“I just thought that since we are all alone out here that we could do a sun bath *together*.”

Clark surreptitiously used his x-ray vision and determined that she didn’t have the bikini on under her clothes. He didn’t have his swim trunks on either. His quizzical look intensified.

She reached out and unbuttoned the button of his polo shirt and then reached down to grasp the hem. She pulled it slowly up, and he stretched his arms over his head so that she could take it completely off of him. As she dropped it to the cabin roof, she reached up and started slowly sliding her hands all over his chest. When she had been doing this for a while, she reached down and

unbuttoned his jeans and slowly ran his zipper down.

He reached out and unbuttoned her top and reaching down pulled her top up. She released him and put her arms over her head so that he could remove it. He pulled her into a hug and kiss, and while he held her close, he unhooked her bra. When she stepped back, her bra joined their shirts on the cabin roof.

He unbuttoned her jeans and knelt in front of her as he slid them down her luscious legs. As he started slowly pushing them down, he followed the waistband down with kisses as more flesh was revealed. Kissing the outside and front as he moved around to the inner thigh, she tried to spread her legs, but the jeans wouldn’t let her, and she whimpered in frustration. He slowly removed her jeans worshiping her legs by kissing them from hip to ankle. When she was finally able to step out of them, she emitted a sigh of relief.

She picked up the sun tan lotion and handed it to him. With an arched eyebrow she asked, “Want to put this on for me?”

With a mock serious tone Clark said, “Your slave madam.”

Lois laughed. “No, not my slave, my *husband*. I love the sound of that, and I love you,” she said as she put her sunglasses on and lay back on the towel.

This time when he was applying the lotion, he did her front as well as her back, and he was able to pay special attention to those areas of her body that hadn’t had any prior opportunity to be exposed to the sun.

When he finished lathering up her body, she pushed him down intending to take her turn enjoying the feel of every square inch of his magnificent naked body as she applied the lotion to him. Just as she was about to, he stopped her and said, “I really don’t need any lotion. You see I don’t sunburn. I get my powers from sunlight.”

With a pout she said, “So you’re taking away my fun?”

“Do you need the lotion as an excuse to put your hands on me?”

“No, I guess I don’t.” Suiting her actions to her words, she set aside the lotion and proceeded to enjoy the feel of his skin under her hands. She came to the conclusion that she enjoyed it this way almost as much.

As they lay there side by side, Clark told her about retrieving the Ubuntu from Dongou.

“After I left at the end of visiting hours, I went back to the hotel. I changed into my dark clothing and took off from the roof and flew to the outskirts of Dongou. I settled up with our watchman and released the boat from the slip. I took her out under power until I was out of sight, and then I idled the engine. That was when I started to fly again.”

“You said that you were flying standing still. How does that work?”

“When we’re done here, I’ll show you. I’ve got a lot of things to show you.”

The rest of the day was spent showing Lois his powers. At the end of the day they returned the Ubuntu to her slip in the port and returned to the hotel.

For the next several days the honeymooners contented themselves with exploring one another and discovering even more of each other’s likes and dislikes.

June 18, 1992

When it had been two full weeks since her release from the hospital, Lois was due to return for a post-op checkup. They arrived at the hospital at about 10 AM.

When Lois reported in, she was sent to exam 6 to await the doctor. At 10:30 doctor M’benga walked in the door.

“And how is our patient today? You are looking very well indeed!” He noted the rosy color in her cheeks and her vibrant appearance.

"I'm just fine doctor. I haven't felt this good in a long time."
 "It appears as though your husband is taking good care of you."

"Doctor M'benga, you have *no* idea how well he is taking care of me. I couldn't ask for a more devoted, patient, and caring husband. He's just ... super." This was said with a look at Clark that said, 'We share a secret'.

"Well, let's just see how super his care has been. Let's start with your vitals." As he started taking her vitals, he continued the conversation. "What kinds of activities have you been engaging in these last couple of weeks?"

"Well, let's see. We've had some picnic lunches at the golf club grounds, we've gone out on our boat and done some sun bathing and swimming, but mostly we have been spending a lot of time in our rooms together."

He had only been half listening as he was taking her vitals. That concluded he asked her, "Would you please raise your shirt so that I can inspect the surgery site?"

Lois looked at Clark. They both knew that he was in for a shock when she pulled her shirt up. He gave her a nod indicating that she should go ahead. She reached down and grasped the hem of her tank top and pulled it up as high as the bottom of her bra.

Doctor M'benga looked at where he was sure the surgery site had been, but all he could discern was a slight reddening in the area. There wasn't even a scar to show where the bullet had entered or where the incision had been made. He reached out and touched her unblemished skin with a bewildered look on his face. "This is incredible! What has happened to the scarring?" He looked over at Clark. "How have you done this? How did you remove all signs of her injury? I must know! This is a medical miracle! We have to market this! Can you imagine, people with no scars after plastic surgery, people with severe burns recovering without skin grafts. The possibilities are endless!"

Clark replied, "Really doctor, all I've done is follow your orders and change the dressing as needed. I guess she's just a good healer."

"This is one for the medical journals. I would have liked to have documented your healing process with pictures. It's such a shame that wasn't done. Well, you may pull your shirt down, my dear. It looks like my work is done! I see no further need of you coming in to see me unless you determine that there is a need."

Clark said, "Thank you, doctor M'benga, for everything. I will not forget what you have done for us, and I will express my appreciation in the future. You can count on it. Oh, Dr. M'benga, before I forget, there is a possibility that someone from the rebel cause could try to ascertain if anyone was admitted with gunshot wounds recently. It's extremely important that no one find out about my wife's injuries. An order will be forthcoming from the mayor's office that the records be sealed, but I would ask as a special favor to us that both you and Dr. Bashir as well as your staff keep all of this strictly in confidence."

"My boy, think nothing of it. I will pass the request on to Dr. Bashir, and you can count on our confidentiality. As for your gratitude, it's not necessary; I was simply doing my job. I'm just sorry we were not able to document her healing process. That would have made a terrific journal article." He picked up her chart and wrote 'Discharged' across the bottom shook hands with both of them. Lois pulled him down and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He thanked her and left.

Chapter 27 — Celebration

June 18, 1992 PM

They returned to the Land Rover and drove to Le Jardin for lunch. After lunch they returned to the hotel and cuddled for a time.

That evening, by way of celebration, they chose an upscale

dance club for dinner. This was a very special celebration, so Lois wore an outfit with a bare midriff so that she could wear her belly button jewel along with the rest of the set. It consisted of a gold lame halter with a deeply scooped neckline and a white very low riding hip hugging gown which reached to her ankles and was trimmed with gold threaded embroidery around the hem. She wore golden slippers instead of heels. As she moved, the gown was loose and flowing and made of a very soft material which clung to her legs as she walked. Clark wore his tux. They entered with her hand on Clark's arm.

When they entered the club, a hush fell over the entire room. The Star Sapphires almost literally glowed in the lights and made a spectacular show. That and Lois' regal bearing took the breath away, affecting not only the men but the women as well. Several of the women came out of their awed state before their husbands or companions and nudged them to get their attention back. Most of the men just couldn't tear their eyes away from her.

The Maître de cérémonie seated them at a ring side table right in front of the band. Clark handed her into her chair. They ordered some wine and their meal. While they were waiting for their mea,, the band started playing. Clark stood and extended a hand to Lois in invitation. She took his hand and he led her to the dance floor. They danced to a slow number.

Before the second number started an unknown young singer calling herself Mistress Barbara came out. When her number started, it was a Leonard Cohen song, "Dance Me Till The End Of Love" (6).

Cue — "Dance Me to the End of Love" (6)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcMoQAsBNom> recorded fits the text better

When the music started, Lois got the feel of the driving almost oriental style beat. She said, "Let me dance for you." She released his hands and started dancing in a semi-oriental belly dance style, dancing for an audience of one — her husband, who was the center of all her attention. Without Lois realizing it, all of the other couples on the floor exited, and all were watching her performance. The men at their tables were mesmerized by her watching her move her body in the sultry movements of the dance.

Lois started moving around the floor, sliding her feet, and moving her hips and arms. Stepping and thrusting her hips alternately to the beat as Clark looked on in obvious appreciation.

*"Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin
 Dance me through the panic 'til I'm gathered safely in
 Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove
 Dance me to the end of love
 Dance me to the end of love"*

She started moving her hands around in circles in front of herself as she leaned back shaking her upper body. She continued the shimmy as she moved upright again and started moving around the floor. Clark followed every move with his eyes.

*"Oh let me see your beauty when the witnesses are gone
 Let me feel you moving like they do in Babylon
 Show me slowly what I only know the limits of
 Dance me to the end of love
 Dance me to the end of love"*

She had straightened and was moving her head side to side while her arms were out at her sides. She then moved on to hip shaking and thrusting as she moved around the floor. Clark was having trouble restraining himself; her dance was enticing him so.

*"Dance me to the wedding now, dance me on and on
 Dance me very tenderly and dance me very long
 We're both of us beneath our love; we're both of us above
 Dance me to the end of love
 Dance me to the end of love"*

She leaned back again, moving her arms stretched out and

moving like serpents. She slowly moved back upright and then leaned forward still moving her arms in the same way. She started moving round the floor again. As she neared him, he started to reach for her but with a little giggle she danced away from him.

*“Dance me to the children who are asking to be born
Dance me through the curtains that our kisses have outworn
Raise a tent of shelter now, though every thread is torn
Dance me to the end of love”*

She did a little spin. She turned a single rotation which flared her skirt out showing off some of her legs. She started the hip shimmy again while doing a slow twirl. The hip shimmy gradually stopped as the twirl got faster and faster, her skirt swirling out practically parallel to the floor revealing even more of her luscious legs. She slowly stopped spinning and started moving around the floor, step thrust, step thrust, hip shimmy, etc. Again she almost came within reach and danced away again. He was starting to feel frustration. Her sexy movements were arousing him, and he wanted to hold her.

*“Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin
Dance me through the panic till I’m gathered safely in
Touch me with your naked hand or touch me with your glove
Dance me to the end of love
Dance me to the end of love
Dance me to the end of love”(2)*

As the vocal came to an end, she did a few more turns around the floor and then sank gracefully to the floor into a semi kneeling/sitting position, leaning slightly forward, head bent down, arms outstretched, and hands open and cupped to Clark almost as if in supplication. He stepped to her and reached down for her hands. She gracefully stood and moved into his waiting arms, and he supported her with his left arm as she leaned far back with her left leg almost vertically in the air with only the toes of her right foot on the floor. As the instrumental finale faded out, he pulled her up, and their mouths found each other in a deep soulful kiss. When they broke the kiss, there was applause from all in attendance. Lois did a deep courtesy, and they returned to their table.

They enjoyed a pleasant meal. Many of the men who had seen her dance stopped as they passed and complimented her on her dance. She accepted their praises gracefully. When they had finished their meal, they returned to their suite.

After they were inside the suite, Clark swept her into his arms and said, “You were magnificent! I didn’t know you could dance like that.”

“Neither did I. I wanted to dance for my husband and just did what I thought you would like. ***Did*** you like it?”

“Lois, I loved it, and I love you for dancing for me. I believe that every other guy in the audience liked it too but not as much as me. They can only wish you were theirs. I know you’re mine, now and forever.”

“Make love to me Clark, ***now*!**”

He picked her up and supersped both of them into the bedroom and into bed.

June 19, 1992 AM

“As much as I’m enjoying this time alone together, we have some things that we really need to do, and it might be best if we started sooner rather than later. I need to get back to Midwest U and take those make-up exams so that I can graduate. I need to get you back so that we can start writing up this story. I want us to start investigating Lex Luthor. He is the one responsible for the guns in the hands of the rebels; therefore he’s the one responsible for you being shot. We have to stop him, and we can do that by exposing him. Here is another thing to add to the list, we need to deal with the Kryptonite in and around Smallville.”

“We definitely need to do that; in fact, I would give that a

high priority. Now that I have you, I don’t want to lose you because of some rock.”

“Okay, we make that priority one. I need to contact Wayne Irig. Wayne was appointed executor of my parent’s estate. He has control of it until I graduate college. When I tell him that I’m about to take my finals and that I’ve gotten married, I don’t think I’ll have any trouble getting access to the farm. It’ll probably need some fixing up, but when I call Wayne, I can ask him to bring in a cleaning crew to at least make the place presentable for my new bride. How soon should we leave?”

“I think that we should probably get tickets for next week’s flight. That’ll give us time for our goodbyes. I want to be there when you say goodbye to the twins. What do you plan to do with the Ubuntu?”

“I was thinking about making Jacques and his family custodians. We have a lot of pleasant memories that we’ve made with that boat, so I’m reluctant to sell her.”

“I like that idea too. That way once you can do things openly; maybe we could come back for some weekend cruises.” She got her little wicked gleam in her eyes as she said, “We can make some more pleasant memories. Should we call Perry and let him know we’re coming home?”

“I still think we need to hold off on that. I think we can call from the local office and at least let him know that we are wrapping up and will be returning soon but leave it open ended so that we have the time we need in Smallville.”

“Okay, sounds like a plan. I’m sure Perry will be relieved. At least he’ll know that I’m alive.”

“To be honest with you, I never notified him that you were injured. In the here and now he doesn’t know me, and he won’t until you introduce me to him.”

With dawning comprehension she said, “That’s right! Boy is he going to be shocked! I can’t wait to see his face when I introduce you to him as my husband and new reporting partner. When I tell him, he has to hire you as my reporting partner or else we go somewhere that we can work together, he is going to be speechless. I hope he doesn’t have a heart attack.”

“You may want to drop some hints beforehand to prevent that.”

With a wicked grin she replied, “No, I don’t think so. I want to see his face when I tell him.”

“Okay, you’re the boss.”

“And don’t you forget it! When I tell you to do something, I want it done.” Another grin. “Like now ... kiss me.”

“Ha ha ha, you’re wish is my command. I’ll gladly obey those kinds of orders!” he said as he leaned over to kiss her.

When the kiss was finished, she had a very satisfied look on her face with a smile, and she said, “I thought you would.”

They stepped off the plane in Wichita, picked up their luggage, and went to the car rental booth. They picked up the keys for the car they had reserved, loaded up their luggage, and headed for Smallville.

Once they were in the car, Clark started pointing out the sights. He took a roundabout route so that he could show Lois all of the points of interest before they hit the highway to Smallville. After they were on the road for a while Clark said, “Wayne assured me that everything would be ready for us when we arrive. All we need to do is stop by his place and pick up the keys to the house. That’s just Wayne’s sneaky way of getting to meet my new bride. He thinks I might not bring you around for a few days. He could have left the house open and the keys on the counter. Nobody would have disturbed anything even with the house unlocked; Smallville doesn’t have a very high crime rate. Wayne’s been like a father to me ever since my parents died in the crash. It was just a shame that he couldn’t get custody of me. Because he couldn’t, I wound up in the foster care system. You’re

going to like him. He's a good person."

"If you think that highly of him, I'm sure I will. How are we going to go about searching for this Kryptonite?"

With a more than somewhat mischievous look on his face he said, "Well, I could just walk around, and when I pass out from the pain, you could dig up the rock and put it into a lead box ... nah, I don't think so." As he was speaking, he was watching out of the side of his eye to see her response. He was rewarded with a somewhat shocked expression which relaxed as he completed his statement. He started to laugh.

Realizing that for a moment there she had been had, Lois reached out and punched his arm, forgetting all about his invulnerability. "Ow, I bet that hurt me more than it did you! I keep forgetting. Don't you ever do that to me again! I don't want you deliberately placing your life in jeopardy. Now that I've found you I want you around for a very long time."

"Okay, how about this, I'll try using my enhanced vision to spot it below the surface, and you can mark the spots. Then we can hire some reliable people, perhaps some of my old friends and school mates, like Pete Ross and Billy Eck that I know are reliable, to actually dig the stuff up and box it. They should be home. Most of them either work on the family farm or in one of the shops in town. We can tell them that it's a research project we're working on. Once it's all boxed up, we'll have a couple of options. First I could take the box to the top of a high mountain and bury it where it will never be found, or second I could fly up into the stratosphere and launch it out of the solar system."

"What kind of box?"

"It's radioactive, well, to me anyway. So I guess it would have to be a lead box."

"Do they have those in Smallville?"

"Good point. I don't know. We might have to drive back to Wichita and try a hospital supply company."

"Once you get it boxed, why not send it into the sun?"

"I don't know what effect that would have. The Kryptonite could be destroyed, or it could react with the sun surface somehow so that it starts to emit K-radiation which wouldn't do me any favors."

Lois thought about these options for a few minutes then said, "Let's not take the chance that someone would find it buried on that mountain." Some more thought. "Let's not send it into the sun either, too risky since we don't know all that might happen. I think sending it out of the system is the best option."

Clark's expression sobered up from the light banter. "There's one thing I didn't ask. Should we keep at least one piece just in case?"

"In case of what?"

All seriousness now, he asked, "What if I, I don't know, what if I run amok. What if I try to take over the world or something? Without the Kryptonite there wouldn't be anything to stop me."

"Clark, the mere fact that you're thinking about that tells me that it would never happen. You're too good a person to ever try something like that. That's one of the reasons I love you so much." She was constrained by her seat belt so that she couldn't lean far enough over to kiss him. She had to settle for reaching out and caressing the side of his face with her left hand as she was speaking.

Finally Clark pulled up in front of Wayne Irig's house and parked. He got out and opened Lois' door and escorted her to his door.

Chapter 28 — Lana

June 30, 1992

Metropolis

Nigel St. John knocked on Lex's office door. He heard Lex say, "Come in!"

"Mr. Luthor, we just got a report in on the latest arms

shipment. The Brazzaville office reports that the arms arrived safely."

"Very good, excellent, excellent in deed. We need to start preparing the next shipment."

"There was one thing. There was a report of some Americans following the cargo. They were captured by the rebels; however, they managed to escape. The rebels say that they claimed to be reporters. The circumstances of their escape seem to be somewhat jumbled, but one definite detail is that they were both shot; the female had a mortal wound and the man was at least wounded. The man disappeared along with the body of the woman. They assume that he took the body and fled while they were otherwise occupied. They were convinced that there was no way for him to be able to survive without food, water, or shelter, being wounded and carrying that burden. Also in that area there are plenty of big cats prowling. If they scented blood, they would have finished them off. All that would be left would be some bones."

"Were they able to get any names?"

"The leader of the rebel team that had them said he heard the names 'Charlie' and 'Linda'. There was another thing that was somewhat unusual. The leader was disarmed by the man. His trigger finger was broken, and somehow the gun he had used on the woman was mangled. He was struck a single blow which knocked him out and broke his jaw. His report had to be in writing since his jaw is wired shut."

"Contact them and have the gun sent to Brazzaville. Contact our man in the State Department and have it sent back in the diplomatic pouch. I want to see that gun."

Lex continued, "I want a follow-up done. Have them search the area from where the encounter occurred all the way back to the town. Interview anyone that might have seen something. Check the local hospitals for any gunshot wound victims. We need to be sure. Follow any leads you get."

Nigel gave a nod of assent and turned to leave. Luthor stopped him. "Nigel, check and see if any newspapers are missing any of their staff. Let's see if we can identify who we are dealing with."

Again Nigel nodded and this time managed to get out the door.

Luthor brooded over this information. It looked like there was a leak somewhere, and he would need to plug it. He hit an intercom switch. "Mrs. Cox, please come to my office at once." He started tapping his finger on his desk as he waited.

Dressed in an extremely short skirt and a very low cut blouse, Mrs. Cox entered the office without knocking. "Mrs. Cox, it would appear that we have a leak in the operation. It appears as though someone passed on the information about the guns to the media, and a couple of reporters were following them. There's no telling how much they found out. I would like you to call in the head of that operation and have him in my office tomorrow morning." He thought for a few seconds before continuing.

"Tomorrow is going to be difficult trying to get to the bottom of this. This evening why don't you order dinner for two to be sent up; you'll join me, of course."

"Of course, Lex," she swayed her hips very suggestively as she exited his office.

He watched her as she walked out planning just how he would relax with her before he really dug in on this problem tomorrow.

Smallville

Lana walked into Maisie's Diner and took a seat at the counter.

Maisie walked over to her and asked, "Hi, Lana, what'll it be today?"

As she was in the process of sitting on the stool at the counter she replied, “Hi, Maisie, just a cup of coffee, please.”

Maisie turned around and drew a cup. As Maisie set the coffee in front of Lana she said, “I hear that Clark is back.”

“Huh, he’s back?”

“Yeah, how are you holding up?”

“What do you mean, ‘How am I holding up?’”

“You know since the break up. How are you holding up?”

<How did she know? I haven’t told anyone that we broke up. I thought that he might come to his senses and come back to me.>
“What do you mean? What break up?”

“You and Clark.”

“We didn’t break up!”

“You didn’t? Then who’s that living with him out at the farm?”

All the color drained from Lana’s face, “*What*!!!!”

“You didn’t know????? Oh, Lana, I’m so sorry. I thought you knew, and it was because you had broken up!”

Lana felt like she had been pole axed. She was in a daze, but her daze quickly gave way to anger. Her coffee sat on the counter getting cold as her emotions flared. She got up like one in a dream and exited Maisie’s and headed for her car. The reality slowly sunk in, and her anger turned into determination. <Who is this woman? How dare she steal Clark from me? He’s mine!> She got into her car and drove straight to the Kent farm.

When she arrived, there was no one there. She decided to wait so she took a seat on a rocking chair on the porch. The longer she had to wait the angrier she got.

Finally after about an hour, Clark and Lois drove up. Clark had seen her car in front of the house and had warned Lois. “Uh oh, that’s Lana’s car. I haven’t spoken to her since that terrible call from Brazzaville. She doesn’t know we’re married, but the last thing she said was that it was either the powers or her. I told her then that I couldn’t stop being what and who I am, and she hung up on me. I hope she doesn’t make a scene.”

As they were parking, Lana got up from the rocker and descended the porch steps. As they got out of the car and Clark got a close look at her face, he could see that her eyes were red and puffy, that her mascara was ruined, and that there were tear tracks down her face.

Clark said, “Lana ... “

She interrupted him, “Why, Clark? Why did you do this to me? Why?” She glanced over at Lois as she was saying this.

“Lana, I’m so sorry. I never intended to hurt you like this.”

With a bitter laugh she replied, “Well you sure succeeded. I thought we had an understanding! What is she doing here?”

“Lana, I’m sorry I hurt you, but our last phone conversation ... “

“I know about our last phone conversation. I told you that if you weren’t coming back to me to stay away, and here you are, but you’re with ... *her*.”

“Lana, we’ve known for a long time that it would never work between us. You always wanted me to deny what and who I am. To stand by and allow evil things to happen when I could prevent them. That’s not who I am, and I could never live that way.”

“But Clark, we had an understanding!”

“Lana, people change. I’ve changed. I’m not the person you saw off to school six months ago.” He gave Lois a sideways look. She picked up on his statement but carefully kept her expression neutral.

Lana stepped up to Clark and started beating on his chest emphasizing what she was saying as if physical violence would change things. “Clark, I want things back the way they were. Send her back wherever she came from and come back to me.”

Clark grabbed her hands more to prevent her from injuring herself than for any other reason and spoke calmly to her. “I can’t do that Lana. It never would have worked out with us. I just

couldn’t keep on denying what I am and what I can do. Lana, Lois and I are ... *married*. I’m sorry. We’ve been married for a little while now. We can’t go back to the way things were. It’s too late for us. You have to move on. I have.”

Lana collapsed in a heap at his feet crying hysterically. Muttering over and over, “Clark, Clark, why? Why?”

Clark knelt down and helped her to her feet and assisted her in walking over to the porch. He set her on a rocker and tried to soothe her by stroking her hair and patting her back. After a time she seemed to settle down. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why did I have to find out from Maisie?”

“After our last conversation, I didn’t think you wanted to hear from me. I should have, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? *sorry*!. Sorry doesn’t hack it! I don’t *understand*. *Make* me understand. How could you *do* this to me?”

Kneeling down in front of her Clark took her hands in his and speaking like he would to a distraught child said, “Lana, we’ve had problems with our relationship right from day one. Then when I finally told you what I could do, you insisted that I hide it. You didn’t want me to do anything to help anyone. You wanted me to hide out here in Smallville and pretend that I was a ‘normal’ man. Lana, that’s not me. It’s not something I can do. I have these powers for a reason, and I feel an obligation to use them for the good of humanity. I can’t just sit on the sidelines and watch the world pass by. When I played football in high school, the time I hated the most was when I had to sit on the bench and watch. I *need* to participate. You would have benched me, and we both would have been miserable. More accurately it would have made me miserable, and I in turn would have made you miserable. The only real togetherness we would have had would have been our common misery, and that is no way to live.”

Lana had been openly weeping the entire time he had been talking. She sniffed a couple of times. Clark handed his hanky to her. She dabbed at her eyes and wiped her nose and said, “Maybe I could have learned to put up with it.”

“Lana, you and I both know that isn’t the case. Your fear both for me and I think actually your fear of me would have prevented that. I know what you’re going to say, you don’t fear me, but really, I’ve seen it in your eyes. It was too strong for you to hide completely. Even with all that, I still trusted you with my secret. I still trust you not to reveal it.”

She gave a couple more sniffles before she said, “I would never tell anyone. I would never hurt you that way. I’ve never wanted anything bad to happen to you.”

“I appreciate that, and I never questioned your loyalty. I’m sincerely sorry that this happened this way. I never meant it to. Lois and I met a few months ago and fell in love. I was going to tell you the last time we talked, but you hung up on me. I took that as a break-up. Lois accepts me for who and what I am. I’ll be going public soon, and it’s partly due to her support that I’ll be doing what I need to do, which is helping people in peril. I’d like it very much if we could at least remain friends, and I’d sincerely like you to be a friend to Lois.”

“Clark, I still love you. How can I get past that?”

“I don’t know, Lana. I can only hope that you can change that love into like. I still like you, Lana. You were my first real girlfriend and the first person I trusted with my secret. That must say something for how I feel about you.”

“I guess so, but we were planning a future together. What am I going to do now?” A fresh set of sobs started.

“Lana, you’re going to have to find some ‘normal’ guy that can make you happy. What about Pete Ross? He’s liked you for years. He just hasn’t said anything because he was my best friend. I’m sure that if you tell Pete that we’ve broken up, he’ll jump on the chance to go out with you.”

“Really? Pete’s interested in me? I never realized.” As the

realization of what he had been saying sank in, her sobbing stopped. Her face had taken on a look of disbelief. "Pete? really?"
 "Really. I've known for years. He just didn't want to cut in on his best friend."

"Wow! I never knew."

"Actually I'm surprised he hasn't said anything by now. He knows about Lois and me. He's been helping us with a little project. It's possible that he has been holding off because he's waiting to hear back on a job application, and he's not sure if he's got the job. Tell you what, why don't we do this, Lois and I will invite you and Pete to dinner. Separately, not as a couple and see if Pete says anything."

"Clark, are you sure? You'd do that for me?"

"Lana, I'd do just about anything I could for you, you know that."

She got a kind of watery smile on her face as she replied, "Yeah, I guess you would at that."

"Alright then, it's settled. Lois and I'll be inviting you and Pete to dinner. Let's say Friday night at 7:30. How's that?"

Her spirits appeared to be picking up as she replied, "That'll be fine."

Lois had been standing off on the side as Clark had been handling Lana. She stepped forward now and extended her hand to Lana. Clark stepped aside and said, "Lana, I'd like you to meet Lois Lane-Kent, my wife."

Lana took Lois' hand and slowly shook it. Lois, overcome with compassion for this woman, pulled her into an embrace. Lana was shocked at first by this action but then realizing that this woman really was a good woman and the one that Clark loved, brought her arms up and returned the embrace. Lois said, "Lana, I'm sure Clark is right, and everything will work out. You can count on me for anything you need to help you."

Lana pulled back somewhat and replied, "Lois all I really need is for you to make him happy. That's all I really ever wanted for him."

Lois looking over at Clark said, "He is, and I plan to keep him that way. Now we need to get you to the same state, happy. You know, I could really use some help. I'm not a real good cook. Could you come over and help prepare the meal on Friday? It'll give you an opportunity to show Pete just what a good cook you are. The way to a man's heart is through his stomach you know."

Lana was really seeing Lois for the first time and seeing her as possibly a friend. She nodded and said, "Sure, I can do that as long as you're sure."

Laughing Lois responded, "Trust me, I need the help."

"Well, okay then. I'll come over a couple of hours in advance."

"Just let me know what you want to prepare, and Clark will pick everything up."

"Okay, I'll call you tomorrow with the list."

"I'll look forward to your call." Lois gave her another hug.

Lana looked back and forth between Clark and Lois. She noted his expression, his obvious pleasure that she and Lois were going to be friends. She also noted his very obvious affection for Lois and hers for him. He was giving her a look that she had never had him bestow on her. She was realizing the correctness of this decision and was starting to accept it. She reached out and took Clark's hand. Totally unexpectedly she reached out with her other hand and took Lois' hand and brought their hands together. "I'm happy that you found someone that can make you happy. I'm sorry it wasn't me, but you're right. We probably would have been miserable together. I'll probably be happier with Pete. It's worth a try anyhow. I'll call you tomorrow. Will you have called Pete by then?"

Clark laughed, "Count on it. One way or another, he'll be here. I think that all I'll need to tell him is that you're going to be here, and he'll show up with bells on."

Lana laughed at the picture that engendered in her mind and said, "Normal clothes would be preferable."

All three laughed together.

Lois put an arm around Lana's shoulder and directed her into the house as she said, "I think some repairs are needed. Let's go into the bathroom. You can use my mascara."

Lana put her arm around Lois and said, "Thanks, I guess I really do need to do the repairs. I probably look like a witch."

"We'll have you presentable in no time." They moved into the house.

After sharing some time together during the repairs and some 'girl talk' wherein Lana told Lois some anecdotes about Clark, Lana was presentable enough to go back into town. She was headed back to Maisie's to clear up what had happened earlier and quash any rumors that might start. She would let everyone know that she and Clark were still friends even though they had broken up and that his wife, Lois, was one of her best friends and that she was happy for them.

Chapter 29 — 348 Hyperion Ave.

Friday July 3, 1992

Friday night couldn't have gone better.

Pete, seeing the obvious green light that Clark was giving him, asked Lana, "'Dead in the Water' is playing at the Talon, would you like to go see it tomorrow night?"

Lana replied, "Why, Pete Ross, are you asking me out on a date?"

Pete replied, "Yeah, I guess I am. Do you want to go out with me?" He had a hopeful expression on his face.

Lana laughed, "I'm just wondering why it took you so long to ask. You've known about Clark and Lois for a while now."

"I wasn't sure how Clark would take it, and I have this job application in, and I've been helping Clark with this project and ..."

Lana laughed again and said, "No need to excuse yourself, Pete. I'm just glad you finally asked. Can I get a large tub of popcorn?"

With a relieved tone in his voice Pete said, "Anything you want. I'll even get you a giant soda pop if you want."

In a bantering tone she replied, "Only if it's diet. I have to watch my figure you know."

That set the tone for the rest of the evening, and everyone had a good time. It looked like things would work themselves out.

On Monday, July 6, Lois gave Perry White a call.

The phone was answered on the second ring. "Daily Planet, Perry White speaking."

"Hi Chief."

"Lois, is that you, Darlin'?"

"Yeah, Perry, it's me. We're back in the states."

"You are? That's wonderful! How did the investigation go? Where are you? How soon are you going to file the story? Are we going to nail the culprits?"

Laughing she replied, "Whoa, whoa, slow down, Chief. One thing at a time. The investigation had a few glitches, but we're okay now. I don't think I want to tell you where we are right now. It's our own little hide-a-way. I think we're going to hold off on filing the story ..."

"What? Why? If this is the story I think it is, then we need to get it out there. This is the scoop of the year!"

"Perry, we want to hold it back because we believe that it's only part of a bigger story, and we want to bring it in all at once. If you thought that this story was perhaps Kerth material, we are looking at Pulitzer!"

Perry was speechless as he absorbed the import of what she was telling him. Finally he replied, "Lois, if you're serious about this, whatever you want to do, we'll do. It has been a long time since someone at the Planet has captured the big one. How soon

can you fill me in on what you have and where y'all are goin' with this?"

"As soon as we get back. We ..."

Perry interrupted at this point, "There you go with that we again. Am I to assume that you brought this new partner of yours back with you?"

"Well, yeah. We kinda hit it off. We want to continue working together."

"Is he any good? Is he Planet material?"

"I think it's safe to say that you just might have been willing to hire him even without my recommendation." Looking over at Clark she gave him a smile and a wink. He smiled back.

Continuing on Lois said, "Chief, I'd like you to let it get around that I've been on an extended vacation. That I just needed a break from the grind, but that I'll be back soon, okay?"

"Why do we need to do that?"

"There was an incident during the investigation, and we don't want any possible hint that I was in the Congo to get around. If anyone were to find out, it could compromise the investigation and be dangerous to us. The ones behind the gun running won't stop at anything to avoid exposure, even murder."

"That serious huh? Okay, you got it. Extended vacation because the daily grind was getting to you. When do I get to meet this new partner of yours?"

"We should be there in a couple of weeks. We have some things to do first."

"Okay Lois, we'll see you, both of you, in a couple of weeks. Bye!"

"Bye, Perry. See you soon." She hung the phone up. "Okay, that's taken care of."

"I like the extended vacation idea. That covers for us being in the Congo. I think that we need to concoct a story of how we met while you were on vacation, fell in love, and got married. That should completely deflect any possible suspicion from us."

"Good idea, what do you think, were we in Hawaii or some secluded island? I know how about this, we were on a cruise, and I fell overboard. You jumped in to rescue me, and we wound up on a deserted island together and were just recently rescued. The ship's captain married us to make an honest woman of me." As she finished this scenario she started laughing so hard that she almost couldn't get it all out.

He started laughing as well and suggested an alternative, "No, I think I was the one that fell overboard, and it was Lois Lane to the rescue."

As they both caught their breath from their laughter Lois said, "We really have to work on that. We do need to come up with something realistic before we get back to Metropolis."

While they were in Smallville, Clark went on campus to complete his make-up exams and managed to bring his grades back up to where they should have been without the unexplained absence and graduated with honors. He had missed the formal graduation ceremony but that mattered very little to him. He was just glad to be finished and have it behind him.

As soon as this was done and all the Kryptonite that they could find had been rounded up and dispatched out of the solar system, it was time to return to Metropolis. Unfortunately that still left the chunk that Tempus had used on him in the future. He, from a distance of course, had examined each piece that had been unearthed and had not recognized it among those pieces that had been collected.

July 17, 1992

Before they locked up and left, they had a discussion about the farm. Clark wasn't sure if he wanted to keep it or not. It had served a useful purpose while he finished up his college requirements, and they did the Kryptonite search, but now what

did he need it for? He asked Lois, "What do you think about the farm? Should we keep it or sell it?"

"Personally, I think you should keep it for a number of reasons." She started ticking them off on her fingers. "First it was your parent's, and they would have wanted you to have it. Second you have a lot of memories from the time you lived here with them. Third we could use it as a get away from the hustle and bustle of city life. To be honest believe it or not, it reminds me of our time on the Ubuntu without the rocking motion. It's so peaceful and quiet; I love being here with you, and fourth if we have children someday, I'm sure you would like to spend time with them here where you grew up. Next ..."

With a laugh Clark interrupted at this point and said, "You present a very powerful argument Mrs. Kent. Okay, we keep it. We can fly out occasionally and work on fixing the place up more the way **we** like it. I'm sure you have some things you want to do just like when we refit the Ubuntu."

"You had better believe I have. Let's see, first there's the furniture in the master bedroom then ..."

Laughing even louder Clark interrupted again, "I knew it! I'm going to be spending all my time moving furniture!"

She was laughing very hard as she replied, "Well, I don't know what you have to complain about. Moving furniture is easy for you! Don't you pity all those poor husbands that don't have your powers and still have to move the furniture anyway?"

"I guess I should; it just never occurred to me. I've never been in a position where I've needed to. Now that I am, I couldn't be happier about it. We can start with the furniture next trip.

Right now, we have a plane to catch to Metropolis. Let's go."

"I'm with you. The house is locked up. We're ready to go.

After they arrived in Metropolis, they checked into the Lexor and settled in. The next day they went out apartment hunting. Lois' apartment was going to be too small for the two of them. Clark was familiar with 348 Hyperion Ave from his time spent with the other Clark and Lois, so they contacted a realtor. The brownstone, being currently on the market and available, attracted him greatly, and he insisted that they go and look at it. The realtor met them at the door.

After they had been looking at the ground floor for a bit Clark said, "Well, Lois, what do you think? It's larger than your old apartment; the upstairs has several spare bedrooms for guests and an extra room that we can use as an office."

The realtor, somewhat bewildered asked, "Have you been in this house before? How do you know what's upstairs?"

"I, uh, some friends of mine have a house **very** similar to this one. I've, uh, I've been in it a couple of times."

Lois was talking more to herself than him as she said, "Spacious living room, dining area, nice sized kitchen." Then to the realtor, "Can we go upstairs? I'd like to see the master suite."

"Of course, right this way." She led them upstairs.

"Oooohhh, I like the master bath. There's plenty of room in that shower." She turned from the realtor and looked over at Clark arching an eyebrow. As she did she couldn't suppress the smile which resulted from seeing his response which was to blush a rather bright red. Turning back to the realtor she said, "Where do we sign. We love it!"

Downtown

Nigel knocked on Luthor's door. From the other side he heard, "Come!" Nigel opened the door and entered carrying a box.

"Ah, what have we here? Is this the package from the Congo?"

"Yes Sir. It arrived by courier a short time ago." He placed it on Luthor's desk in front of him.

As Luthor opened the box he asked, “What have you found so far on the follow-up?”

“We haven’t found a single trace of either the man or the woman. It’s like they vanished into thin air. Which is the oddest coincidence. One of the native bearers had been sent to the camp to request a relief crew be sent. As he was nearing the edge of the grassland he heard shots being fired. Because of this, he moved ahead more cautiously. It was almost dark so he couldn’t see much. He said that suddenly what he described as an evil spirit took off from the ground and flew away. He panicked and fled back to the cargo train. When the security team from the cargo train arrived at the site, they found the group that had been escorting the prisoners either unconscious or tied up. There was blood on the ground and marks of a scuffle but no bodies.”

Luthor looked up with the mangled gun in his hand and said, “And this. What could have done this to this weapon?” He was turning it over and over in his hands. “It was fired at least once before it was crushed. How was it crushed?” Luthor was wearing a very pensive expression. “An evil spirit you say? The native said an evil spirit flew up from the ground?”

“Yes, sir. But you know how these superstitious natives are. Most of the time you can’t believe even half of what they say.”

“But, what if? What if we take what he said as fact?”

“It was dark; his eyes could have been playing tricks on him.”

“But what if they weren’t? What if something, no, someone took the woman and flew her to safety?”

“According to the shooter, it was a mortal wound.”

“Ah, but perhaps only if medical care was not immediately available. Expand the search immediately. Check every hospital in a two hundred kilometer no, on second thought check every hospital in the country for a woman with a gunshot wound. When did the incident occur? Whatever, I want to know if a woman who had been shot was brought into a hospital the night of the incident, any hospital. I need to know what I’m dealing with.”

“As you wish, Sir. I’ll initiate the inquiry immediately.” Nigel turned and left.

Luthor continued to sit at his desk turning the crushed gun around and around in his hands and muttering. “No normal man could have done this. It would take enormous strength to crush this steel. And to be able to fly?!?!?!? How could this possibly be? I just may be up against a worthy adversary. I’ll find you, whoever and wherever you are. I’ll find you, and if you cross me, I’ll crush you!” Looking down at the gun again, he voiced his thoughts, “I’ll crush you the way you crushed this gun. Lex Luthor will crush you the same way I have crushed ***all*** of my adversaries, with cunning. Physical strength is as nothing compared to my brain. Lex Luthor will win.”

Lex depressed a key on his intercom, “Mrs. Cox, attend me if you will.”

“Right away, Lex.”

As she opened the door Lex was replacing the crushed gun back in the box. “Have this sent to LexLabs. I want a complete analysis. I need to know just how much force needed to be applied to crush this gun this way. See to it. Oh and call the madam and have her send one of her girls over tonight.” When he saw her hurt expression, he continued, “I have something else for you to be doing for me tonight, my sweet. I’ve checked, and the only Metropolis based paper that has an office in Brazzaville is the Daily Planet. I want you to pack an overnight bag. I’ll have a jet waiting for you. I want you to go to Brazzaville, to the Daily Planet office, and see if you can find out if any of their reporters were checking up on our arms shipment. I expect you can use your abundant talents to secure all the information I need.”

Chapter 30 — Lana and Pete

Two weeks later

As soon as they had consummated the deal for 348 Hyperion Ave, Clark took Lois out to buy a car. The car which she had had prior to her trip to the Congo had been a rather heavily used car which she had picked up cheap. In the time she had been away, it had been broken into and stripped. Lois was somewhat disappointed but not really. She hadn’t liked that car very much anyway. Clark still had some funds left from the trip, so it was decided that they could afford to splurge on a new car. The only questions were what make and what model. They went to several dealerships. Considering that she would be the one driving the most, Clark had told her that she could choose anything that she liked. They started off at some foreign car dealers. Most of the oriental offerings had great fuel economy but were kinda cramped for Clark, and besides she decided that she wanted to buy American, so she rejected them. They looked at a number of other vehicles until she found one that she really liked. They closed the deal, and she proudly got behind the wheel of her sapphire blue metallic colored Jeep Grand Cherokee, and they drove off the lot.

Clark and Lois had decided that they would take whatever time they needed to prepare their new home before they reported in to the Planet. Accordingly after they had gone to settlement on 348 Hyperion Ave and had taken possession, they went to look at wallpaper, paint, fabric patterns, carpet, and furniture. The Jeep had come in handy for hauling cans of paint, furniture, window blinds, etc. It had been a whirlwind two weeks, but with the judicious use of superspeed, they were ready and move in in record time.

August 7, 1992

Standing in the foyer arm in arm, they surveyed the results. “What do you think?” Clark asked her.

Almost gushing she replied, “Our little love nest. I love it. Now that it’s finished, and we are ready to move in, I have a request.”

“What would that be? Different wall paper? Different color paint? I thought we were happy with all those things.”

“I am! My request has nothing to do with that! It has to do with tradition.” She turned around so that she was facing him at a distance of about 12 inches and said, “I think it’s time for you to carry me over the threshold for real.”

He laughed at this but quickly calmed himself and leaned down to kiss her. He took her hand and led her outside. He leaned in for another kiss, and while they were still kissing, he picked her up and carried her back inside. He kicked the door shut with his foot and preceded up stairs with his burden, not stopping until they were in their bedroom. He laid her on the bed and said, “Well, Mrs. Kent, I know it’s not a tradition, but shall we christen the new bedroom? I still remember that comment you made about the shower.”

Lois squealed in delight. “Last one in the shower’s a rotten egg.”

Almost before she completed her challenge, she heard the water running in the shower. She quickly moved to the bathroom and looking in saw his silhouette in the shower stall. “No fair! No fair! You cheated!” She heard the water go off and two seconds later found herself nude and in the shower with him. “That’s more like it.” She continued in a more sultry tone. “Commere, big boy!” She reached up and put her arms around his neck, her body melding to his as she started kissing him. After a couple of minutes of this, he reached around her and turned the water on. Picking up a tube of body scrub gel, he squeezed some into his hands and started running his hands all over her body, starting at the shoulders, moving down across her collar bones to her breasts where he lingered for a time, then down across her flat stomach. He then stroked the length of both legs.

He was just about to move to her inner thighs. She stopped

him at this point and said, “My turn.” She squeezed a quantity of gel into her hands and started on him. Just as he had done with her, she started at his shoulders moving her hands slowly across the broad expanse of his chest, teasing his nipples before moving down across his abs.

After a period of intimacy, Lois almost chortled, “Wow, we managed to christen more than the shower! We’ve christened our new bed as well. I love it!”

Clark, with awe in his voice and love in his eyes said, “Sometimes I still feel like I need to pinch myself. I can’t believe that this isn’t a dream. If it is, I don’t want to wake up.”

“If this is a dream, I’m glad I’m in it with you, and I don’t want to wake up either.”

They napped for a bit and called for Italian takeout. They ate while they watched a movie, and while the movie played, they cuddled on the couch and then went to bed.

August 10, 1992

The next Monday Lois called Perry. “Daily Planet, Perry White.”

“Hi Perry, it’s Lois!”

“Lois, Darlin’, how are you? Are you back in town yet? When are you coming in?”

“Well, that’s what I was calling about Perry. We’ve been back in town for a couple of weeks, kinda getting re-acclimated. We’d like to come in today if that’s okay with you.”

“Now you know you don’t have to set up an appointment to come in here. You’re still my best reporter. Are you ready to get back to work? Did you get the rest you needed?”

Lois thought, <There must be someone in the office there with him. He’s playing up the needing rest from the daily grind story.> “Is there someone there in the office with you?”

“Sure is! Your desk is right where you left it.”

“Okay, you can’t talk right now. We’ll be in to see you in a little while.”

“That’s fine. I’ll see you after while then.” He hung up the phone.

As she hung up her phone she said, “Perry couldn’t talk. We need to find out why when we get there.”

“Let’s grab some lunch then we’ll head in to the Planet.”

Perry was out on the floor of the bull pen when a ding announced the arrival of the elevator. He turned his head to see just who was on board. His face lit up when he saw Lois as she came out through the doors with Clark in tow. She spotted him right off and bobbed her head in the direction of his office. He nodded and started moving in that direction. He got there just in time to open the door for them. “Have a seat. So Lois, just who do we have here?”

“Perry, I want to introduce Clark Kent.”

Perry stuck out his hand which Clark took and shook. “Pleased to meet ya, son. I hear you been takin’ good care o’ Lois here.”

Lois interrupted before Clark had a chance to answer, “He had a good reason to Perry.” She held up her left hand to show him her ring. “We’re married!”

The expression on Perry’s face was everything that Lois had hoped it would be. He went from surprise to shock to disbelief and finally to joy. “Darlin’, I’m so happy I don’t know what to say!”

“How about congratulations.”

“Yeah, well *yeah*, congratulations to both of you! How did it happen? Was the day to day really getting to you? I thought you were working on you know what.”

“We were, but we started working together and got to know and like each other, and the rest is history.”

“Well, you sure look happy, just like Elvis and Priscilla.”

“We are Perry. You’ll be pleased to know that Clark is a top notch reporter too. How soon can he be added to the payroll?”

“Well, about that, I can’t just hire him off the street, you know that. He has to apply for a position, I have to have an opening, he has to go through the interview process, I need his resume, and I need to see his portfolio.”

“Perry, I, we, need you to cut all the red tape and hire him on my recommendation. Can you do that for me?”

“Lois, you know I have some leeway, but that’s a lot to ask.”

“Perry, Chief, you know I wouldn’t ask you to do anything you would regret later. Believe me Clark brings a lot to the table. You won’t regret it.”

Turning to Clark Perry asked, “I’ve heard Lois’ build up. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Well, Mr. White, Lois and I worked on this investigation together from start to finish. When it’s written up, you can judge for yourself.”

Turning back to Lois, “But you’re telling me that you want to hold off on the story.”

“That’s right, Chief. You’re going to have to trust us on this.

This story might be big, but it’s only the tip of the iceberg. When we finish, we’ll be nailing the biggest crime boss Metropolis has ever seen.”

“Well, apparently you’ve been stirrin’ somebody’s pot. In the last week or so we have had several inquiries about where my reporters are. They been lookin’ specifically for anyone on assignment outside the country.”

Clark said, “I think I can guess the source. Was it by any chance Lex Luthor?”

Perry looked like he had been hit between the eyes with a two by four. “I wasn’t completely sure, but you’re probably right. Why would Lex Luthor be interested in Lois?”

“He’s not nearly as squeaky clean as everyone thinks he is.”

Clark looked at Lois and said, “I think we left too many clues behind. I need to call Dr. M’benga and see if he has been quizzed.”

“Don’t forget Dr. Bashir. It might be a good idea to call Jacques and see if he had the hospital records locked if it isn’t already too late.”

Perry was feeling left out so he chimed in, “Wait just a doggone minute. What are you two goin’ on about?”

Lois continued as if she hadn’t been interrupted. “If they are asking around here, they must have checked the Brazzaville office!” She turned to Perry. “Perry, we need you to make a call. I need you to call Derek Price in the Brazzaville office and see if any strangers have been in the office nosing around.”

His level of frustration was building so his voice was somewhat elevated as he asked, “What’s goin’ on?”

“Okay, Chief, here’s the situation, our cover may have been blown. We need to find out just how bad it is. Was that who was here in your office earlier? Was it someone asking about me and where I was?”

“Yeah, that’s it exactly. I gave them that vacation story that we came up with. I don’t know if they bought it or not.”

Lois looked at her watch added some hours and then said, “Let’s see, it’s the middle of the night in Brazzaville right now. If you could call first thing in the morning, we’d appreciate it.”

Since they had been back, they had been keeping an eye on the news via LNN, and they knew that the Prometheus shuttle was being prepared for launch. Clark, taking a chance on the history of this universe being a very close parallel to the other Lois and Clark’s universe, brought the conversation back to the previous topic. “Mr. White, if the team of Lois Lane and Clark Kent can bring you a scoop on the Prometheus launch, will you hire me?”

“You bring me a front page story, and the job is yours.”

“You’ve got it. The Prometheus shuttle is scheduled to lift off in three weeks. Leave space on the front page for a story and have the employment papers made out. You’ll have your scoop. Come on Lois, we have some work to do.”

“Okay, whatever you say. Perry, we’ll call the story in. We’ll both be here full time starting the next day. In the mean time if anyone asks about me, here is the story we want you to tell them.” She and Clark went over the story that they had concocted. They had put a lot of work into it, and it sounded very romantic and would be believable to all but the most skeptical. It was also vague enough that it would be hard to verify or refute.

That afternoon

“Lois, do you remember what I told you about the other Clark and how he made his debut?” She shook her head in the negative. “Well, his Lois wanted to get an exclusive on the launch of the Prometheus shuttle, so she snuck onboard. When she did, she found an explosive device attached to some systems. She cut some cables to cause a delay. Clark arrived just in time and swallowed the bomb. I’m betting that we are going to find something similar here.”

Lois started getting excited and asked eagerly, “Do you want me to stowaway?”

“No, I don’t think that will be necessary because I basically know what to look for, and I can do it from a distance. We can stay nearby, and I can scan for the bomb, then when I find it I can call in an anonymous tip. I’m not ready for a debut yet.”

She was somewhat disappointed at his response. She really wanted to be at the center of the action but was satisfied that they could still do this thing. She said, “If this works, it will really get Luthor’s goat. I can’t wait. Let’s do it.”

They napped for a bit and called for Chinese takeout. They were just about to settle in for a movie when the phone rang. Clark picked it up and answered, “Kent residence.”

He recognized Lana’s voice when she said, “Clark?”

“Hi, Lana. We haven’t heard from you for a few weeks. Is everything okay?”

“Clark, I have Pete here. Is Lois around?”

“Sure, she’s right here. You want to talk to her?”

“No, do you have speaker phone on that?”

“Sure, you want me to put this on speaker?”

“Yeah, I’d like this to be a four way.”

Clark hit a button and said, “Can you hear me now?”

Pete replied, “Loud and clear bud. Okay, listen up you guys, we have some good news and some bad news.”

Lois chimed in with a little laugh, “It can’t be all that bad if you two are together.”

Lana replied, “You’re right about that. Pete, you want to give them the good news?”

“Okay, here goes. Clark, do you remember that job I applied for?”

“Sure do, Pete. Whatever happened to it?”

“Well, the hold up was for a security clearance. That finally came through. I got the job! I start in four weeks!”

“Pete, that’s tremendous news. Who is the job with?”

“That’s the bad news. I start work in four weeks at S. T. A. R. Labs there in Metropolis. I’m going to head up the Geology and Metallurgy lab.”

“How is that bad news? You will be moving east, we can see each other more often.”

Lois saw the other side of the issue and spoke up, “How are you taking this Lana?”

“Well, Pete and I decided that we didn’t like the idea of a long distance relationship.”

Pete said, “Why don’t you tell them your news?”

“Okay, Lois, Clark, Pete asked me to marry him!”

Clark said, “That’s wonderful!”

Lois cutting to the chase said, “What was your answer?”

Lana, excitement and joy evident in her voice almost shouted, “I said, yes!”

Lois said, “Lana, I’m so happy for you, congratulations!”

“Thank you, Lois. You know I have you and Clark to thank for this. Clark, you were right.” She didn’t say that he was right that they would have been miserable together; she didn’t need to because they both understood. “Now I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Anything, Lana. Just ask.”

“I need a Matron of Honor.”

“Oh, Lana, I would be honored.”

Pete spoke up, “Clark, I need a Best Man.”

Clark replied, “You got it. I would be happy to stand with you. How soon are the nuptials to take place?”

“Since I start the new job in four weeks, we plan to have the ceremony in three weeks. We plan to have an abbreviated honeymoon because we have to find a place to live and move.”

Clark asked, “Pete, how about we do some scouting around for you and find you a place, somewhere near us?”

“What do you think, Lana? Do we trust them to find us a place to live?”

She was laughing as she replied, “I think we could trust them with our lives. What does that say about them choosing an apartment for us?”

Lois said, “Clark, how about we let them use our spare room until they’re ready to move in. That would help cut their expenses and give them some time to decorate.” Clark nodded his agreement. “What do you guys think? Want to live with us for a while till your place is ready?”

Lana said, “Lois, thank you for that kind offer, but we wouldn’t want to put you guys out that way.”

“Lana, if it wasn’t okay I wouldn’t offer. It’s a done deal. You guys will stay with us until your place is ready. No arguments! Now that that’s settled we can come out next weekend to do the planning and pick out the gown and dress. We can have the final dress fittings the following weekend. How big is the reception going to be?” They started making the plans.

After the phone call Lois put her arms around Clark and said, “I’m happy for them. I just hope that they will be as happy together as we are.”

“I think they’ll do alright. Pete has loved her for years. He just didn’t want to cut in on his best friend. Yeah, I think they will be alright together.”

They watched a movie while the cuddled on the couch and then went to bed.

Chapter 31 — The Prometheus Shuttle

August 11, 1992

The next morning Lois had a call.

“Lois? Perry.”

“Hi Perry.”

“Lois, I made that call. It looks like some strange woman was in the office. She vamped some reporter named Claude. He probably spilled the beans. Derek didn’t know, and Claude wouldn’t own up to anything, but Derek said he didn’t like Claude’s attitude. It was like had a bug in his bonnet.”

“Yeah, he didn’t like being aced out on the story. I wouldn’t put it past him to try to get back at us. Oh well, looks like the fat is in the fire now. At least all he had was our undercover names. We’ll have to wait and see. Thanks Perry. We’ll be in touch as soon as we’ve broken the shuttle story.”

Since they had three weeks till the launch, they were able to take the time needed for the planning of Lana and Pete’s wedding. They found them an unfurnished apartment within a few blocks of their home and took pictures with them to show to

Lana and Pete on one of their trips to Smallville. Lana and Pete liked what they saw, so as a wedding gift to them Clark and Lois paid the security deposit and six months rental for them.

The wedding on August 5 went off without a hitch. The bride was radiant and the Matron of Honor was equally beautiful, at least the Best Man thought so. They sent them off on their honeymoon telling them not to hurry. Since they were going to live with them until the apartment was ready, they just needed to be in Metropolis the day before Pete had to report to work.

All of the papers were covering the story of the launch of the Prometheus shuttle with its cargo of personnel to staff the space station. The Daily Planet was no exception. Clark and Lois were keeping a low profile as they moved away from the main pack of reporters. In order to keep from being too readily recognized, she wore a drab business suit, had her hair pulled back in a tight bun, and was wearing a pair of glasses. It had been so long since Lois had been actively engaged locally as a reporter that there were few of her peers that could actually recognize her. To all intents and purposes she had simply vanished from the public eye. A lot of her peers thought that she had given up investigative journalism in favor of writing novels.

Clark knew from what he had been told by Lois in the other universe that Lex Luthor had been behind the sabotage of the Prometheus shuttle in that universe. They got into a position that afforded Clark an opportunity to use his x-ray vision to do a complete scan of the rocket. Sure enough the parallels between this universe and hers were still holding true. Clark spotted an explosive device attached to a fuel supply line. This was a small device designed to simply cause a rupture in a line to create a fuel leak. The fuel would then ignite and blow the ship to bits, and it would have been extremely hard if not impossible to find the actual cause.

While Lois kept watch, Clark made a call to give an anonymous tip to EPRAD Control. After being transferred to the launch director he said, "I don't think it's very wise to send up that shuttle. There is a bomb on board set to detonate shortly after liftoff."

"What??? Who is this? Is this some kind of joke?"

"This is no joke! If you don't care about the lives of every person on board, go ahead and launch. If you want to save their lives, I would suggest that you stop it right now and find the bomb. This is no joke. I'm deadly serious. You launch and you murder everyone on board."

"Who is this?"

"I'm a friend. Just call me Charlie." Clark hung up.

A few seconds after closing the call they heard over the speaker system that the countdown had been put on hold for technical problems.

They observed a crew open an emergency hatch and start the passenger removal process. Another hatch was opened and a crew with protective gear entered. Clark watched as the crew searched for the device. He saw them miss it on their first pass, so he called back.

"I see you took my advice and the countdown is on hold. Look for a small device attached to a fuel valve. All the bomb is designed to do is rupture the valve to release the fuel. The leaking fuel would then detonate and blow the ship up."

They watched as a new individual in protective gear was dispatched from control and headed for the rocket. He entered the same hatch which had been used by the search crew. Clark used his x-ray vision and watched as he approached the individual who was probably the one in charge and led him directly to the location of the explosive.

Clark said to Lois, "They found it. We're good to go. I'm going to call the Planet."

As he was doing this, EPRAD control called the bomb squad

people over, and they disarmed the bomb and removed it.

Clark dictated the story to Perry. Perry was ecstatic. "By Elvis this is the biggest story of the month if not the year! Welcome aboard. Whatever it takes, you're hired!"

While Clark had been making the call, Lois had been watching the activity with a pair of field glasses, and when she saw the bomb squad leave, she turned to Clark and throwing her arms around his neck gave him a big kiss. In a whisper so that no one could overhear her she said, "We did it! We saved the shuttle." With a very sober tone she continued, "All those lives that we just saved. All those lives *you* just saved. I couldn't have done it. If it wasn't for your unique talents, they would all be dead by now. You're a remarkable person. I love you, Clark! You're so special."

"We did it together. We're a team not two single people, and don't you forget that, okay? I'll tell you later how this went down in the other universe."

"Okay, I'll try to remember, partner. And I look forward to hearing the story."

They moved over nearer to the EPRAD Control center so that they could participate in the impromptu news conference which was just starting as a result of the incident.

When they returned to the Planet, they wrote up their complete story to go along with the brief which had gone out as a special edition. Their follow-up story grabbed the front page and scooped all of the competition.

"Anonymous Tip Saves Shuttle"

By: Lois Lane and Clark Kent

"An anonymous tip given by someone calling himself simply 'Charlie' resulted in a bomb being located ..."

They were very satisfied because they had successfully prevented this incident without having to reveal who Clark was or his abilities.

EPRAD was able to reschedule the launch with no more damage other than a slight delay while they awaited the next launch window.

As soon as the story was filed, Clark took Lois to the roof of a building nearly as tall as Lex Tower where she could use her field glasses again. Clark used his x-ray vision combined with his telescopic vision to observe Lex Luthor. What he saw was very gratifying. Lex was extremely angry and was taking his anger out on a slightly older somewhat portly man with a van Dyke beard. He walked over and activated a switch which turned on a holographic projection of a space station. Clark said to Lois, "It's a pity we aren't recording the conversation he is having with his underling. I'm sure he is ranting about the failed sabotage of the shuttle. We need to get in there to bug his place. Any ideas?"

"Let me think about it for a while."

If they had been able to listen in on that conversation, they would have gotten an earful.

"If it hadn't been for an anonymous tip, the shuttle would have been destroyed, and I would have control of the space effort! Nigel, have you seen the papers??? 'An anonymous caller calling himself simply Charlie'!!! He's here, they're here! They are interfering in my plans! I won't have it! Find them. Eliminate them!"

"How? We don't have a good description on either of them. All we know is Charlie and Linda, and those probably aren't their real names."

"I don't care how you do it, just find them and eliminate them. Use whatever resources you need, just do it!"

"Right away, Sir."

As they entered the Planet building, they stopped in the lobby and picked up a couple of coffees after which they headed for the elevator. When they exited on the newsroom floor, Clark escorted

Lois from the elevator with his hand at the small of her back. They descended the ramp and moved to her desk where Lois dropped her bag in the lower right drawer and as was her habit, kicked the drawer shut.

Lois said, "Let's go see Perry."

They headed for Perry's office. Just as they started moving in that direction, Perry opened his door and leaned out. He was just opening his mouth to call them when he saw them approaching. He threw the door open and stepped back. "I was just about to call you. Congratulations on the shuttle story. Clark, you can have the desk near Lois'. Welcome aboard!"

"Thanks, Mr. White."

Addressing Clark he said, "You're part of the team now, so from now on it's either Perry or Chief." Turning so that he was now addressing both of them, "So, what are you planning on working on next?"

"We are doing some more on the Congo story. I need to get my accounts set up so that I have computer access."

"Okay, just keep me posted. I've always trusted Lois' instincts. I can see that she's been right about you. You've got a lot of potential. Just keep me in the loop, okay?"

"You got it, Perry."

They exited his office and returned to their desks. Apparently Perry had already spread the word and Clark found a name plate already on the desk. Also apparently Perry hadn't spread the word of their marriage.

Lois sat down at her desk and started going through the e-mails that had accumulated during her absence. Clark pulled out the notes and film from the Congo investigation. He needed to get the film developed.

He was about to summon the office gofer when he was interrupted by the arrival of Ralph Pinedo who leaned on his desk. "So you're the unlucky schmuck that got stuck with the Ice Queen. I hope you have a set of mukluks, you're gonna need 'em." He gave Lois a lecherous leer. "She's good enough looking. I wouldn't kick her out of bed, if you know what I mean."

"Your name wouldn't happen to be Ralph, now would it?" Lois had warned him about some of her more obnoxious co-workers.

"Yeah, Ralph, Ralph Pinedo, you've heard of me?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact I have, and you just lived up to your reputation. The woman you are talking about, Lois Lane, happens to be the warmest, sweetest, most passionate woman, and genuinely nice person I've ever met. You can take it from me as fact because you see she happens to be my wife. Now you can take your lecherous comments and keep them to yourself in the future. If I ever hear you saying anything about my wife again, I just might lose my temper and do something I might regret later. And trust me my hearing is excellent."

Ralph blanched and got away from Clark as fast as he could.

Lois had watched the exchange with interest. She couldn't hear it all but had a feeling that she knew the content. She would have to ask Clark later.

Clark had seen the office gofer running various errands. As he was passing his desk, he stopped him and introduced himself. "Hi, my name is Clark Kent. I'm new around here, but they tell me that if I need anything to call you. I think somebody told me your name is Jack, is that right?"

Jack had been a street tough that had been picked up by the police and hadn't been placed in juvie only because Perry White had offered him a job at the Planet. He had turned out to be a good worker and was rapidly picking up more and more responsibility. He came over to Clark's desk. "Yeah, just call me Jack. What can I do for you, Mr. Kent?"

"Well Jack, here's a roll of film I need developed. Could you get it down to the photo lab for me? Tell them that I need it

ASAP."

"You got it, Mr. K. I'll get it right down there."

"Thanks, Jack. I appreciate it."

"Don't mention it. If you have anything else you need, you just let me know."

"When you come back, come see me. I have some research I could have you do, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all. Count on me. I'll be right back."

"Thanks, Jack."

Lois had been going through her e-mail but only with half of her mind occupied. She had been thinking about their other problem with the other half. She got up from her chair and moved over to Clark's desk. She perched on the corner and slowly brought one leg up and crossed it over the other causing the split in her skirt to open and reveal a delicious length of leg. She couldn't help the smile that crossed her lips as she saw his reaction. She caught him in an open eyed stare. She slowly reached down and cupping his chin brought his face up so that he was looking at her face. She couldn't repress a giggle as she did so. She said in a tone that she knew only he could hear, "I'm glad to see that I have that effect on you. Maybe I can have the same affect on someone else. I think I have an idea. Lex is sponsoring the White Orchid Ball in a ball room on the same floor as his office/apartment in a few weeks. Maybe we could manage to get invited."

Clark could almost literally see the wheels turning in her head. He knew she would have the complete answer shortly. He couldn't have been more correct.

"Remember your bedtime story?"

"Yeah, but what does that ... "

"Remember the beautiful princess?"

"Yeah, but what does ... "

"Remember your wedding gift to me?" she said as she reached up and fingered the Star Sapphire earrings she was wearing. They had quickly become her favorite earrings, and she wore them at every opportunity.

"AHHhhh, I see where you're going now. It just might work at that. In order to get an invitation though he's going to have to know that there is someone he wants to invite. I think that with Perry's help we can put some articles in the paper about a royal princess who is visiting Metropolis, a very ***rich*** royal princess. Yeah, it just might work."

He jerked his head in the direction of Perry's office. With a nod of agreement she hopped down off his desk, they picked up their cups again, and they started walking. They were half way there when Perry opened his door and started to lean out with his mouth opening. When he saw them headed his way he stopped and standing straighter, he opened his door wide to allow them to enter.

"How do you do that? It seems like every time I'm about to call you, you're headed in to see me. What can I do for you?"

"Thanks, Chief. We thought we'd give you an update on the other story and ask a favor."

Lois spoke up, "Chief. Clark and I have had an idea that we wanted to float by you. We are pretty well convinced that Lex Luthor was behind the sabotage attempt on the Prometheus shuttle, but to prove it we need to get some confirmation."

Lois continued, "Chief, we need to be invited to the White Orchid Ball but not as Lois Lane and Clark Kent. We need to do it undercover. Clark gave me some jewelry for my wedding present that gave us an idea."

"Be honest, Lois, this was all your idea. I just think it's terrific."

"Okay, my idea, but if you didn't treat me like your fairy tale princess all the time, it never would have occurred to me." She looked at him with love in her eyes. "Anyhow, Chief, here's the idea. I have some jewelry that looks like it's straight out of the

English Crown jewels. We need to plant some articles about a visiting Royal Princess staying in Metropolis, maybe in the Lexor Hotel. I'll provide the jewels and the gown if the Planet will spring for the hotel room for a few nights. We need to make it look good."

"What are you plannin' to do at the ball, if I might be so bold as to ask?"

"Well Chief, we're going to bug Luthor's office and residence."

"What????? You've got to be kidding me. Please tell me you're kidding. We could wind up in a mess of trouble if you get caught!"

"Perry, look at the possible result! We could get enough on him to put him away for a loooooonngggg time! Clark can start planting the bugs while I distract Luthor."

Clark said, "I don't know if I like that too much. You know how dangerous Luthor is. I don't think I want to leave you alone with him."

"Clark, I won't be alone with him! There'll be hundreds of people there."

"Just the same I don't like it."

Lois had a confident tone in her voice as she said, "I can take care of myself, remember? It'll be a piece of cake."

With a worried look on his face Clark said, "Okay, but remember, this time disable not kill."

Perry asked, "Do I want to know what yo'all are talkin' about?"

"I don't think so, Chief. It was something that happened in the Congo. We'd rather not talk about it. It's in the past, let it stay there."

"Speakin' of the Congo, when are you goin' to write that part up so that I can see it? That part has to be at least Kerth material."

"Chief, I just sent the film down to get it developed. I was planning to have Jack do some research for me. The information he gathers for me will be added to the file we're building. If we can get some more on Luthor, added to what we have on him in the gun running story like the Prometheus sabotage, he will be going away for a very long time, and it will definitely be Pulitzer material. He was the source of the guns here in Metropolis. We have the proof. We'll write it up, but we need to hold it back until we have the complete package."

"Wow, okay, run with it. Book the Honeymoon Suite at the Lexor for the time around the ball. Write up whatever you need printed to build the cover story. I'll intercede with the suits upstairs if there is any need, just get me that story."

"You've got it Perry. Lois and I'll do our best."

By the time they were back at their desks, Jack was waiting for Clark. "What do you need, Mr. K?"

Clark pulled out the notes from the warehouse. "Jack, I'd like you to trace these weapons from manufacture to last owner. Think you can do it?"

"Sure Mr. K. Piece of cake."

"Thanks, Jack. If I'm not here, please give the data to Mr. White. Put it into an envelope with my name on it."

"You got it, Mr. K." Jack walked off whistling.

Chapter 32 — More Changes to History

While Clark had been speaking with Jack, Lois' phone rang. "Daily Planet, Lois Lane."

"Lois!?"

"Lucy!?"

"Lois, where have you been? I've been frantic! I've been trying for months to get hold of you! Every time I have called in, I've been told you were on rest leave. When I've tried your home number, I couldn't even leave a message because your message machine was full. Then I saw your byline on the shuttle story, and I knew you were back. How are you? What was the problem?"

"Lucy, it was nothing. Where are you now? What have you been doing?"

"That's why I've been trying to get hold of you. I've been finishing up on my training. I'm now officially a computer nerd."

"Well, congratulations! What kind of work are you going to be doing?"

"I don't know yet. I could go into network administration or programming."

"Wow, you're a **real** computer nerd. We could use someone like you here at the Planet!"

"That's another thing I was calling about. I've met someone. He's a computer jockey like me but he wants to start his own business. His name's James Olsen. He's really nice. We've been dating for a while now, and we're getting kinda serious. I sorta feel like I need to hold off though, being the younger sister and all. I feel like I should wait for you to be married first."

"Lucy, don't you let that hold you back. Go for it girl. Have you heard from Daddy or Mother?"

"Yeah, actually Daddy is out here and he's getting back into medicine, legitimate medicine. Mother is back with him as his nurse. She's in AA and hasn't had a drink in six months, and he is not stepping out on her. It was really tough on her when we thought you were missing. The fact that she avoided drinking during that period is promising. We couldn't imagine what the 'sick leave' meant."

"Luce, do you think you could arrange to get together with Mother and Daddy and let me know where and when?"

"Sure, what's goin' on Lois?"

"I've got some news, but I want to break it to you all at once not piecemeal. Here's my new home number. Make the arrangements and get back to me." She gave her the number. "Some time mid week would be good. Just call and let me know."

"Okay, sis, I'll try for Wednesday. How would that be?"

"That should be just fine. I'll look for your call. Bye, Luc."

"Bye, Lois. I'll call soon."

Lois went over and sat on the corner of Clark's desk again. "I just had a call from my kid sister."

"Good, I was hoping we'd be able to track her down."

"She tells me she's met someone. His name's James Olsen .."

With a shocked expression on his face he blurted out, "Who?!?!?!?!?"

Surprised at his response she asked, "James Olsen, is there a problem?"

"Conference room." He got up and escorted her into the nearest conference room and closed the door. "In 1997 James Olsen was a billionaire who made his money in computer programming. He had his own conglomerate. He bought the Daily Planet from Franklin Stern. You say Lucy and he are dating?"

"Wow, yeah, they're dating. She says that they're pretty serious."

Searching his memory to ensure that he was actually relating the facts correctly Clark stated. "In 1997 they are not married, and if they get married, then that is yet another change in history. I had been in contact with her when I had started looking for you, and she had really been crushed by your disappearance. She had really withdrawn into herself."

With some joy in her voice Lois replied, "She said she was waiting until I got married since she was the younger sister. Now that **we** are married, it opens the door for her. Wow, change upon change upon change. I asked her to arrange a meeting with Mother and Daddy."

Almost in shock Clark asked, "What? Say that again."

"I asked her to arrange a meeting with Mother and Daddy. She said that they were back together, and Mom is in AA and doing well."

Responding in some disbelief Clark said, "That's another

change. When you were declared dead, your mother drank herself into her grave. Your father went from one hair brained get rich quick scheme to another.”

With a relieved tone in her voice Lois replied, “I must say, I prefer this version of the future to the one you were just telling me about.”

“Me too, don’t get me wrong. Someone once said that time is fluid like a river with currents, backwash and eddies.(8) We have changed the flow of time, and I guess that these are some of the results of those changes. These are all changes that have apparently flowed from your survival. We just have to hang on and see where this current takes us.” He pulled her into a hug. “I wouldn’t have wanted to leave things the way they were for anything. I’ve got you with me now, and that’s all that matters. As it is, all of these are positive changes. I can’t wait to see what else happens.”

“Luce said that she would try to arrange a meeting Wednesday. They’re all out in San Francisco, actually, Silicon Valley, do you think we could chance flying out there or should we phone?”

“I think it’ll have to be by phone. Otherwise it would be too late a night, and we have so much to do.”

They had some planning to do so they left, and after grabbing a bite to eat, they went home.

“What kind of costume are you thinking of for the ball?”

“We want to make it look good, so I think I need to wear the full set. That means I need a bare midriff. Something on an oriental or perhaps Persian style I think. Something like what I wore to that dance club in Brazzaville. A halter top with a see through over blouse. Hot pants style bottoms with see through pantaloons. Think of ‘I Dream of Jennie’ with a veil. Or a long skirt with a long slit”

“Okay, but to pull that off, you’re going to have to work on your tan. It’s the weekend, and we don’t have to be in the office. How about we pay Jacques a visit and spend the weekend onboard the Ubuntu?”

“I’d love it.” A wicked little grin slowly emerged as she continued, “Especially since I won’t have to pack much in the way of clothes.”

That afternoon they packed a few things, and after darkness fell, they took off. Clark flew them straight up until they were out of sight and then bent his course south-eastward.

This was Lois’ first really long flight, and she loved every minute of it. Part of the time she just relaxed in his arms while every now and then she would sneak in a few kisses. She made sure that she didn’t let that get out of hand since they had a deadline, and she didn’t want to have them fall out of the sky. They arrived on the outskirts of Brazzaville just before sunup, headed for the port and the Ubuntu. On the way they stopped at a market and picked up enough food for a couple of days.

Clark released the spring lines, and Lois eased them out of the slip. It was still early when they anchored. When Clark returned to the after deck, Lois threw her arms around his neck and gave him a very deep kiss, one which held much promise. When they broke from the kiss, she said, “I just love being here on the boat with you. I have since the first day. Just the two of us away from it all together.”

With his arms still around her Clark said, “Ditto, I love being alone with my beautiful wife, anywhere, anytime.”

She gave him a slightly bashful look and said, “Flatterer.”

Stepping back so that he could look her in the face, with a grin and a somewhat awed tone in his voice he said, “No, I always try to speak the truth! That’s one of the things I find I need to do as Superman. Superman must be perceived to be incapable of lying. He can refuse to answer questions, but when he chooses to answer, it has to be truthful. That’s the only way that people will place trust in him. I’m not in the suit right now,

but as Superman I can truthfully say that you’re ***the*** most ***beautiful*** woman I have ***ever*** met! I still can’t believe that we’re together.”

“You say the nicest things. Are you trying to seduce me?”

With an arched eyebrow he asked, “Do I need to?”

She moved over and put her arms around his neck and pulled him down into a kiss. When they separated, she said in a sultry tone, “You can seduce me any time you want to. I’m sure I’ll enjoy it every bit as much as you do.”

Chuckling at that he changed the subject by asking, “How about I make us a snack then we can grab some sleep. This time zone hopping can be unsettling. After a while we can sun bathe.”

“Sounds like a plan. I am kinda tired. I just thought of something. We need to do another refit. We need a married couple bunk. Right now it’s two single people bunks.”

“It might get a little crowded, but maybe we could share your bunk. If need be, I could float next to you ...”

With a wicked grin she finished his sentence for him, “Or I could lie on top of you, but only if you promise to seduce me.”

He was laughing as he said, “Yeah, I like that idea best of all. Let’s eat something so we can go to bed.”

Lex Luthor called Nigel and asked him to come to his office. When he came in, Luthor asked “Nigel, I need an update on your inquiry into the newspaper reporters.”

“There has only been a single reporter absent from the Metropolis office of the Daily Planet, Lois Lane. The report is that she has been on a ‘rest leave’. The pressures of the job had been getting to her, and she needed some time off. She left some time prior to the arms shipment and has only recently returned.”

“Lois Lane ... I’ve heard that name. Wasn’t she involved in the investigation that broke up our car heist ring a little over a year ago?”

“One and the same. Fortunately we were able to cover our tracks, and all she was able to get were the lower level operators. It was a minor hindrance at worst.”

“But a hindrance none the less. Apparently she’s back now, and she is working with a partner. I saw their byline on the story about the Prometheus shuttle. Now that she’s back I want her watched. I don’t want her interfering in any of our other operations.”

“We’ll have to find out what she looks like. I don’t think that I’ve ever seen her picture.”

“See if you can get a picture from the DMV.”

“I can do that.”

“See to it that you do. That still doesn’t tell me who the pair was in the Congo. Continue to follow up on that. Wait a minute. There was a pair in the Congo, and now Lois Lane returns from a rest leave with a new partner. If you asked me that would be too much of a coincidence.”

“The story I got was that they met on a cruise. They left the cruise ship at one of its ports of call after the Captain married them and had their honeymoon. He had been a playboy but had squandered almost all of his inheritance, so when they got back, he joined her at the Planet. It was all very romantic.

“Ah, but is it believable? Check on it.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Oh, and Nigel, when you get the picture, have it wired to our people in the Congo and see if they recognize her.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Luthor depressed a switch on the intercom. “Mrs. Cox, have we received the report on that weapon as yet?”

“I have it right here.”

“Bring it to me, please.”

She brought it in to him and stood by as he examined it. As he read he mused aloud, “Mmmm, partial finger prints, not enough to get a match. Weapon fired once since cleaning. Force

required to deform the metal ... What?? That much? That's physically impossible! I never would have believed it possible to generate that much force. Surely no human hand could generate that much power. There ***must*** be a mistake here. Have them recheck their findings."

"I already did Lex. This is the confirmatory report. When I saw the initial one, I immediately requested confirmation. They took new weapons of the same type and used a hydraulic system to crush it. That's how much force was needed."

"Unbelievable!" He was stunned.

In a basement workshop the Newtrich sisters were working on a project. Actually to be more correct, Nell was working on a project because Nell was the technical brain of the operation, and Lucille was the operational brain.

They had both been laid off from their respective positions, Nell as a technician in the Enhanced Optical Weapons Systems division of LexLabs and Lucille from her position as a reporter for LNN, which was another subsidiary of LuthorCorp.

Neither had been able in the last six months to find alternate employment and their funds were starting to be depleted.

They had been contacted a couple of months previous by a woman named Constance with an offer of employment; however it was something that neither of them would consider. When it was explained that they would be hired as 'Hostesses', they had both flatly refused. Even though they had an outstanding loan on their car and had been told that they had better maintain the payments or else, they decided that they would rather rob a bank than sell themselves. They knew the source of the offer and were very angry. They had developed a determination to take out their frustrations on and have revenge against Lex Luthor as the head of LuthorCorp and the author of their difficulties.

Nell had been working on a Laser which was housed in the case of a video cam, very effectively disguising it. Power would be provided by a belt battery pack just like that used by TV crews. The only problem had been the crystal. They surely couldn't afford a ruby rod, so Nell had used a red rock crystal she had spotted in the lab. It had been small enough that before she was escorted out of the building, she had been able to pocket it and take it with her. She had no idea as to exactly what it was. All she knew was that it was red like a ruby, and it should focus the beam the way she wanted. She wasn't sure exactly how well it would work though. It seemed that in the dark it emitted a red glow of its own, and she didn't know if that might not interfere with the laser beam as it was emitted. They would just have to try.

Lucille walked in while Nell was working. She was very obviously impatient with her sister. "Don't you have that thing finished yet? Nell, the White Orchid Ball is only a few of days away. We need this ready for that event."

"I know, I know. I'm working on it. I just need a little more time. Polishing the ends of this crystal took longer than I had imagined that it would. The ends had to be perfectly parallel in order to prevent scatter or attenuation due to deflection." She fumbled and dropped the crystal as she was trying to get it placed in its holder within the laser. Fortunately it only fell to the desktop. If it had fallen to the floor, it might have shattered. Nell quickly grabbed for it but it skittered out of reach. Lucille reached out calmly and corralled the wayward crystal. Nell was somewhat appalled when she did this because she was not wearing gloves and was getting her fingerprints and body oils all over the crystal as a result. She then handed it to Nell who opened both gloved hands to receive it.

"Nell, be careful! Don't break that, you know we can't afford a replacement. I thought you said I could count on you."

"You can! It just slipped, that's all." She continued muttering to herself, "Now I've got to clean it again."

"Nell, things are always slipping with you. You are the most ***clumsy***, butterfingered person I know. That's one of the things that got you fired from LexLabs. You dropped that weapon you were working on. What was it called the Quinton debilitator or some such idiotic name?"

As Nell was busy re-cleaning the crystal she was shocked at the name her sister had given the weapon she had been working on. She replied with some exasperation, "It was called a Quantum Disruptor!"

"Whatever! When you dropped it, it fried the scientist that invented it before he had a chance to complete the drawings just before destroying itself!. Now it's an incomplete project. They don't even have the prototype to look at!"

"But it wasn't my fault! There was a grease spot on the floor, and I slipped on it! It was an accident."

"Nell, you're an accident just looking for a place to happen. Now tell me about this laser again. How is it going to work?"

"Well, this is my own design. I needed to take some shortcuts because we didn't have the money to buy what I really wanted. I was able to scavenge some of the parts from old TV sets. I built the circuit board from scratch. Here, you see these? These are the capacitors. The power comes from the battery pack and passes through this inverter which changes the current from DC to AC, and then this module steps up the voltage and feeds it to this bank of capacitors. They store the energy and supply it in a burst to the exciter which initiates the source ..."

"Whoa, you lost me back at AC and DC. Can't you put all of that into simple terms?"

Nell, with an exasperated look at her sister, pointed at the power leads and said, "The power comes in on this wire." Pointing at the inverter, "It goes through here and gets changed from one type of energy to another." Pointing at the capacitors she said, "The energy gets stored here until the trigger is pushed. Then it lights the lamp, and this directs the beam to the crystal." Then she pointed to the red crystal and finished in a big climax, "And then it comes out here." She pointed to the lens.

"That's more like it. Don't most lasers use a ruby?"

Nell, starting to lose patience with her sister and her complete ignorance of technical matters almost shouted, "Do you really think we could afford a ruby? Where was I supposed to get the money for that?"

"Okay, okay, no ruby. What's this red crystal?"

"I don't know. Nobody knew. It's just a rock crystal that was sent in for analysis from some place in Kansas. Nobody had gotten around to the analysis, and it's not likely that anyone'll miss it. I thought that I might be able to use it, so I stuck it in my pocket. The only thing that concerns me is the fact that it glows in the dark. I don't know if that will interfere with the beam or not. That's one of the things that I need to test."

"There we go back to tests again. When are you going to start testing this thing?"

Nell, her frustration becoming even more evident, raised her voice even higher, "I'd be able to test it sooner if you didn't ask me so many questions!"

"Shouldn't you be working on putting it together so that you can start the tests?"

Nell said, "I know!" as she picked up the crystal and finally succeeded in placing it in the clips, pinching her finger in the process. She let out an, "Ouch," and stuck the injured finger in her mouth to suck on it.

"How much more needs to be done on this? It looks like you're finished."

With her head close to the mechanism Nell answered in a somewhat distracted manner as she had her hands working inside the mechanism, "No, it's not finished. I have to check and then confirm the alignment, then I have to check the exciter and the power supply. Then I need to check the collimator. Then I have to

recheck the alignment, and then we have to run a low power test ...”

“Just tell me that this is going to work!”

“It’s going to work!”

“Tell me why.”

“Because we have to get back at Lex Luthor for firing us, and we don’t care how we do it. Actually the more painfully the better.”

“Can’t we skip some of those steps? It sounds like it’s going to take you more time than we have!”

Nell looked away from her work and at Lucille, her hands still buried in the mechanism and said, “No, we can’t skip any step, not if you want to be sure it’s going to work the way it’s supposed to.”

“When are you going to start the testing?”

“I should be ready to start the testing tomorrow

“All right then, keep working. Just work faster I don’t want to miss the ball.”

Chapter — 33 — Ellen Lane Gets a Shock

Wednesday evening

Lois and Clark both were waiting for the call to come in from Lucy and Lois’ parents. They were eating Chinese and had just gotten to the fortune cookies. Lois broke one open and tried to read it. “Where did you get this dinner? I thought you went to Ralph’s Pagoda.”

“Nah, I know a better place in Shanghai. I was just careful that I couldn’t be seen or followed on radar.”

“As soon as I saw the fortune, I knew it wasn’t from Ralph’s. It’s written in Chinese!”

“Here, let me see. I’ll read it for you.” She handed it to him. He opened it and started to laugh. “Okay, this reads, ‘Passionate kiss like spider’s web, soon lead to undoing of fly.’”

In indignation she said, “What kind of fortune is that? I was expecting something like, ‘A tall dark stranger will sweep you off your feet you will marry him and live happily ever after.’”

Laughing Clark replied, “But that wouldn’t be a fortune! That would be a past. That’s already happened.”

With a dreamy look in her eyes she regarded him and said, “I know. I just wish I had gotten something like that before we met so that I’d have had some warning. You kinda snuck up on me when I wasn’t expecting it.” She leaned over and sealed that particular comment with a kiss.

When they came up for air, it was Clark’s turn to open his fortune cookie. He broke it open and took out the little paper and read out loud, “‘Man with one chopstick go hungry.’” They both started laughing.

They each had a second cookie. Lois broke hers open and handed the paper to Clark. He translated it, “‘A gem is not polished without rubbing, nor a man perfected without trials.’ That one sure applies to us. We’ve been through some real trials just trying to get together.”

“I’m just glad that most of them are behind us. What about your other one?”

Breaking open his last cookie he read, “‘A rat who gnaws at a cat’s tail invites destruction.’ Well, I certainly hope that doesn’t apply to us. We’re after Luthor right now, and he does pose a serious threat. I just hope we’re the cat in that one. I won’t allow you to be placed in any danger anymore.”

“Wait a minute. You’re my husband, but you’re not going to lock me away to protect me. I’ve spent my life getting into and out of situations. At least now I know you’ve got my back, but even if you didn’t, I’m still going to go for the story. Sometimes it’s going to be dangerous. It comes with the territory. You just need to be there for the times I’m in over my head. Sometimes I don’t check the depth before I dive in, and I do get into trouble. A good example of that was when I was shot. I had asked you to

show me that move, but you never got around to it before I was shot.”

“I think I made up for that later, didn’t I? I taught you the ‘Windmill’ and a few other things.”

With a wicked grin she said, “I like it when you show me things, a few things in particular.”

With an equally wicked grin he replied, “I will be more than happy to show you anything you want me to anytime.”

Just as he finished speaking the call came in.

Lois reached over, lifted the receiver, and said, “Lois Lane.”

“Lois, it’s Lucy and the folks. Got time for the call?”

“Lucy, I’ve been waiting for your call. Do you have speaker phone on that set?”

“Sure do. You want that on?”

“Please, I’d like to speak to everyone at the same time.”

There was a short pause while Lucy turned the speaker on.

“Can you hear me now?”

“Sure can, can everyone hear me?”

There was a chorus of yeses from their speaker. “Hi Mother and Daddy, it’s so good to hear your voices. How’s everyone?”

“We’re just fine, Princess, we’re happy to hear you.”

“I hear that you’re back in medicine Daddy.”

“That’s right, Princess. I decided that there is no such thing as a quick method of getting rich. You have to work for it. You mother decided to help me do just that. I think that we might just be able to reconcile our relationship. At least we’re working on it.”

“Daddy, I’m so happy to hear that, you’ll never know.

Mother, how do you feel about that?”

“Well, as long as things go along the way they are, there’s hope. Lucy said you wanted to talk to all of us together. What’s up?”

“I’ve got this phone on speaker as well. I wanted to introduce you to someone. We met while I was on my vacation. I guess the easiest way to handle this is to ask, Lucy, will you be my Maid of Honor?”

There was a squeal from the phone. When Lucy settled down she almost screamed, “Lois! Really?? You met someone? That’s wonderful! Who is he? How did you meet? What does he look like? I want all the details.”

“Slow down. He’s right here. You say you saw my byline on the shuttle story, well the other name on that byline is my man. His name is Clark Kent, and he’s just a super guy.” She gave him a wink as she said that. “Daddy, I’ll need someone to give me away.”

“You’ve got it, Princess. When can we meet your Prince Charming?”

“We’re on a story right now and are kinda tied up. We’ll have to make arrangements to fly out. Luc, we’d like to meet your beau as well.”

“You got it sis. I’m so happy for you. I can’t wait to meet Clark.”

“Let me introduce you right now. Clark, say hello.”

“Hello everyone.”

“Ellen Lane here, are you going to take good care of my daughter?”

“I think actually that Lois should answer that question.”

“Mother, Clark really takes good care of me, and I love him.”

“Well, as long as he’s going to take care of my little girl ...”

“No one, but no one could take better care of me. You don’t have to worry.”

“We’d like to have the wedding as soon as possible, the sooner the better. The problem is that we are on the east coast, and you guys are on the west.”

“Princess?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Princess, your mother and I have been thinking about

moving back east. How soon would you want the wedding?”

“We could have it anytime you guys are available.”

“Well, your sister seems to be settling into a stable relationship with her boyfriend so we don’t need to be here for her any longer. I have had a job offer which will get me out of clinical practice and into medical research, legitimate medical research. Your mother might or might not be working with me, but I think she’ll be coming with me anyhow. If I accept the offer, we could be in Metropolis by the end of the month. How does that sound?”

“That sounds wonderful!”

Clark asked, “May I call you Sam?”

“Sure, that’s okay.”

“Uh, Sam, who is the new job with?”

“The offer is from S. T. A. R. Labs. They are starting a new division in Medical Research. They heard about the work I did in artificial limbs and such and contacted me. They want me to head up a research group.”

“That will be terrific Sam. S. T. A. R. Labs is a premier facility. I’m sure you’ll like it there.”

“Let’s look at the second Saturday of the month after next then. That will give you time to get settled into your new place and your new job. Luc, could you and your boyfriend make it? Don’t forget I need a Maid of Honor!”

“You couldn’t keep us away! We’ll be there. I probably should come east before then for gown fitting and such.”

“If you want to come early, you can stay in one of our spare rooms.”

Ellen spoke up, “Wait a minute. Did I hear you right? Are you two living together? My unmarried daughter is living with a man? What were you thinking? I’m flying out today!”

“Mother, there is no need of that!”

“What do you mean there is no need of that? You need a chaperone!”

“Mother, listen to me! We don’t need a chaperone! We’ve been living together for months now.”

“Why is there so much of a rush to ... you’re not ... you know ... are you?”

“What? Pregnant?? No, I’m definitely not pregnant! That’s not why we’re getting married.”

“My daughter has been living in sin for months? What were you thinking? Are you at least sleeping in different rooms?”

“Mother, hear me out! No, I’m not living in sin! We also are definitely ***not*** sleeping in separate rooms. Mother, Clark and I are actually married. We were married in a civil ceremony in the Congo. Clark is so sweet he insisted that even though we were already married he wanted me to have all the pomp and ceremony of a church wedding. All our friends know already as do most of our co-workers. Clark wants me to have this, and I’m kinda looking forward to it, so you don’t need to fly out today. Stay there with Daddy, and come to Metropolis when he comes for the new job.”

“This wedding that you had in the Congo, is it legitimate? Is it accepted here in America?”

Lois was rather amused by this question and started to laugh, “Yes, Mother, it’s legitimate. It’s legal and binding. I don’t ***need*** to have a church wedding. Clark ***wants*** me to have it.”

“Okay, if you’re sure. I guess I’ll just come east with Sam.”

“That’ll be just fine. Luce, any idea when you want to come?”

“Can I bring James with me?”

“I guess he could use another of the guest rooms. Yeah, bring James with you.”

“How about we come the last weekend of next month? That should give us the time we need for dresses and all that.”

“Good, that will also give you time to get to know my Matron of Honor, Lana Ross. I was Matron of Honor in her wedding.”

Chapter 34 - Revenge

September 30, 1992

It had been two weeks since Pete and Lana had arrived in Metropolis and a few days before the White Orchid Ball. Pete and Lana had just moved into their new apartment.

Lois gave Lana a call. “Lana, Clark and I are going on an undercover assignment, and we’re leaving this evening to register at the Lexor. Could I ask you to do me a favor?”

“Sure Lois. What do you need?”

“I need some help getting ready for this assignment. Could you come and help me get dressed and made up for this? I could probably do it myself, but it’s so much easier to have someone else do it for you, you know? Like when I helped you with your makeup for the wedding.”

“Lois, I’d be glad to. Where and when?”

“The ball is day after next. If you could come to the Lexor Friday afternoon about 5, that should give us plenty of time.”

“You got it. I’ll be there. Should I bring Pete with me?”

Lois replied, “Sure, he can give an opinion on how effective the disguise is. We’ll be leaving in a few minutes.”

“What room will you be in?”

“Would you believe the Honeymoon Suite?”

“Wow, it must be nice. Are you sure this is for the job?”

Laughing Lois replied, “Yes, it is. We just got lucky on this one. We are pretending to be visiting royalty, and that’s the only suite that would do for our cover.”

October 2, 1992

The day of the White Orchid Ball was upon them. That morning Lex had called Nigel in. “Nigel, what progress have you made on getting a picture of Lois Lane?”

“The picture I was able to obtain from DMV wasn’t really usable, but through a contact in the State Department, I was able to obtain a passport photo which though it is several years old was of better quality. I sent it off to our people in Brazzaville. They flew it up to the rebel camp and showed it to the people that saw the female reporter. They were not able to make a positive ID. They said it could be, but then again it could have been any woman.”

“Did you take the picture to the Daily Planet office in Brazzaville?”

“Yes, but the results were inconclusive. There were only a couple of women in the office at the time, and they refused to cooperate. Our agent got the impression that they had been directed to not answer to any queries.”

“Are we dealing with incompetents? How difficult is it to look at a picture and tell if it’s someone you saw or not? Okay, whatever. Keep following up on that.”

“Another action item. This evening we’ll have several members of the space sub-committees in the Senate and House at the ball. Have a meeting room prepared so that I can get them together and try to convince them to throw their support behind my offer to assist with the space program. Have the appropriate libations available. Send in Mrs. Cox on your way out.”

A couple of minutes later Mrs. Cox entered. “Mrs. Cox, please contact Mitzie and have her send a few of the girls over to act as hostesses for the meeting I’m panning with the members of the Senate and House sub-committees. It would be nice if she would have the special room ready if any of the esteemed members of government would like to accompany one of the girls back to her establishment. Tell her to make sure that the girls are dressed appropriately.”

“I’ll take care of it, Lex.”

“I know, I can always count on you.”

She sashayed out of his office with a sexy swaying of her

hips while he looked on appreciatively.

A few seconds later Lex's intercom buzzed. "Yes?"
"Lex, Miranda is here to see you."

Lex let out a virulent expletive and then calmed himself and depressed a key. "Send her in."

The door opened and in stepped Miranda Michaels. She didn't beat around the bush but came straight to the point. "Lex, where's my money?"

"What money would that be?"

"That would be my cut from the last arms shipment."

"Well, you see Miranda, we ran into some unexpected complications. The shipment was compromised."

"Compromised? Does that mean that we didn't get paid? What happened?"

"There was an apparent leak, and the media were notified of the shipment. There were some reporters following the cargo."

"Was it delivered?"

"Yes, it was delivered."

"Then where's my money? I need those funds to finance my research."

"There were additional expenses." Lex stood up and stepped around his desk. Once in front of it he leaned back against it.

Moving in closer to him she continued, "Don't give me that! You got paid. You should give me my share." Her tone changed and took on a slightly sultry note as she continued, "If you can't, maybe we could compromise." She reached out and started toying with his tie. "Why don't we do this, the ball is tonight. I'd be willing to forgive my share if you'd invite me to come as your date. It could be like old times. After the ball we could spend some time together." This last was said as she glanced in the direction of his private apartment.

Shaking his head Lex replied, "Miranda, Miranda, you know that there is no 'we', not anymore. That's ancient history."

Dropping her hands to her sides she retorted in an angry tone, "In other words there's no us *and* no money."

With something of a sneer in his tone and on his face he replied, "That's right." Lex turned around to pick up a cigar from his humidor. When he turned back around, Miranda sprayed him in the face with a liquid from a small atomizer she had carried in her pocket. "Ugh, what was that? It smells like old athletic socks." He said as he waved his hand in front of his face in an attempt to dissipate whatever it had been.

With a tone of superiority and mystery in her voice she replied, "Just one of my concoctions. I call it 'Revenge'." She gave her brew a few seconds to act before continuing, "Are you sure that there isn't anything that you want to say to me?"

With a tone of finality in his voice Lex replied, "Just good day. You can see yourself out."

With a more than disappointed air she turned to leave. "You haven't heard the last of me Lex." She turned to give him one last look as she exited only to see him blow a smoke ring and exhibit his obvious pleasure with the cigar.

After she returned to her shop Miranda checked the contents of the atomizer. She sprayed a male lab rat and then placed it in the cage of a female. The male rat went through the courting ritual normal for rats which consisted of checking to make sure that his companion was a female and then he mounted her, repeatedly.

She started muttering to herself, "Why didn't it work? This compound should have had him groveling at my feet, begging me to love him and make love to him. I wonder if it has a delayed response in the human species. It sure worked on *this* rat. Why didn't it work on *that* rat in LexTower?"

The limo stopped in front of LexTower. The doorman opened the rear door, and a gentleman in a tuxedo stepped out. Turning

around he presented his hand to assist the woman he had ridden with from the car. A hand appeared from inside the car followed by a shapely bronzed leg and then the rest of the woman. She was dressed in a floor length sapphire blue hip hugging skirt which was slit up the left leg to mid thigh. Her hair had been swept up in a very elegant do. She wore a halter style top of gold brocade with a diaphanous over blouse of light blue. Her slippers were of the ballerina style also in gold brocade matching the top in style. She also wore a veil. It was made of the same diaphanous material as the over blouse and covered her face from ear to ear, crossing her nose just below her eyes and fell to just below her chin; the effect was to reveal and yet still conceal her features. Her eyes were heavily made up and gave the appearance of having a slight slant as a result. Absolutely no one would ever be able to recognize her as Lois Lane. Her bare midriff was as bronzed in color as her shapely leg. What was most striking about her attire was not so much the dress but the jewelry that accented it. It was a striking Blue Sapphire set. Because of her regal bearing, the tiara had the appearance of a crown. This was complimented by the earrings, the mesh necklace, and the other pieces.

The tiara and necklace bore the largest blue Star Sapphires in existence. She also sported a large Star Sapphire belly button jewel which was only fractionally smaller. The contrast of the jewel against her skin was dramatic. The couple moved into the lobby and entered the elevator to the floor where the White Orchid Ball was being held. As they exited the elevator they presented their invitation to the coordinator who announced, "The Princess Adelinde of the Principality of Kongō and her consort Prince Charlot."

Putting on her most regal airs with her hand resting on Clark's extended hand, she made her entry. All eyes were on her, and Clark didn't even need his superhearing to hear the "Ooos and Ahhhs" of those in attendance as she proceeded down the stairs to the hall.

Clark was also disguised. He wore a tux with an over garment which looked like it was part of an Arabian burnoose. He had added a full beard with mustache and an Arabian Shimagh or head scarf. Within the folds of his clothing, he carried a number of listening devices which he planned to 'plant' in Luthor's office area.

Once they had reached the floor, a number of dignitaries had approached them to express their pleasure at the Princess' visit to this country.

One member of the state department approached. "Princess, I'm not familiar with your principality. Might I ask where it's located and what its history is?"

Fortunately they had taken the time to fabricate a history, so Lois launched into her prepared presentation. She was vaguely specific on almost every issue which left the gentleman she was talking to both satisfied and confused at the same time. Being who he was and not wanting to lose face, he couldn't admit to his confusion and thanking her returned to his party. Clark, with his superhearing listened in, "It's a lovely country. Rather small but with great wealth per capita. A rich oil bearing strata being the source of their prosperity. You should visit them sometime." It was all Clark could do to keep from laughing out loud. He decided that he would have to tell Lois what he had heard later.

A short time later Luthor descended the stairs with several members of congress with whom he had been meeting. He had been proposing to add his support to the space effort and EPRAD. His concern over the attempted sabotage of the Prometheus shuttle had caused him to come forth and offer his assistance.

As he reached the middle of the flight he spotted Lois. She was standing alone in the center of the floor looking very regal and very demure. Her pose was such that a delicately shaped

bronzed leg was visible through the slit in the skirt. Luthor excused himself from his party and made a beeline toward Lois. He couldn't take his eyes off of her as he continued the descent on auto-pilot. He felt he had to meet her. He had to possess her. She meant everything to him. He couldn't live without her. When he reached her he asked, "And whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"I am Adelinde, Princess of Kongō and you are?" (She pronounced it Kon-Go' oh.)

"My name is Luthor, Lex Luthor, your servant, your slave." She proffered her hand which he took and performed a deep bow over it as he said this. He kissed her hand and started kissing up her arm until she pulled it away.

"Zen you are zee 'ost of ziss affair. 'ow nice to met you. I sank you for zee inveetation. I 'ave yust recently arriv'ed in zis country and know very few peple. Your inveetation arriv'ed shortly after I took up reseedene in zee Lexor 'otel. Lexor ... Lex — or. You also own zee 'otel?"

"That I do, Princess. If there is anything that I can do for you during your stay to make it more comfortable, simply tell the staff that you have spoken to me and it will be done. Please allow me to come with you, and I can show you ***all*** of the amenities that are available." <I Love her and I must have her.>

"I sank you for your kind o' fair, but zat weel ***not*** be necessary. I find zee suite to be quite comfortable ... a leetle small, but comfortable." <What is going on here? Why is he coming on so strong to me?>

"Which suite would that be?"

"Zee 'oneymoon Suite."

"That is the largest suite in the hotel. I'm sorry you're displeased with it. Perhaps I could come 'fluff your pillows' for you." <I must get her alone. I must have her at all costs.>

When they had seen Luthor at the top of the stairs, Clark had pointed him out to Lois. He had then headed for an exit so that he could make his way into Lex's offices to plant the bugs. It was Lois' job to keep Luthor occupied while Clark did his job.

Luthor continued in his most ingratiating and urbane manner, "If there was any way in which I could enlarge it while you were here, I would do so." Luthor turned slightly and signaled to the band. The band started playing a waltz. Luthor turned back to Lois and asked, "May I have the pleasure of this dance?"

"'ow can I rezeest when zee 'ost ees so gracious?" <I don't like the feel of this. Something's going on. Does he recognize me? Is he trying to distract us?>

They started moving around the floor. Seeing them several other couples began to dance.

As the number proceeded Lois was wondering, <Where is Clark? He has had plenty of time to plant those bugs and get back here.> She was beginning to feel more than a little bit uncomfortable as little by little Luthor pulled her in closer and closer. Just as she was about to lose control and do something which would have blown their cover, Luthor stopped. He had been tapped on the shoulder, and looking past him Lois saw Clark.

"May I cut een?"

"No, you may not! I haven't completed the dance! Go away and don't bother me again! She's with me!"

"Yes, 'owever, zat ees ***my wife*** you are danceeng weeth."

Luthor froze. His hands fell lifelessly at his sides. He was crushed. He stammered "I, uh, I didn't ... I didn't know. I didn't see a ring."

"It ees not our ***custom*** to wear zee wedding reengs. Nonetheless, I am preence Charlot, and she ***ees my wife***. Now, ***eef*** you please, I would like to dance wiss my wife."

"Of course." Turning to Lois he bowed again and said, "Thank you madam for the dance. I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening." Luthor turned and left joining another party in

conversation off the dance floor. Shortly he called over the coordinator. "Who is she?" He indicated Lois.

"The princess Adelinde."

"That's what I thought she said. Okay. Send my secretary to me."

A few minutes later Mrs. Cox showed up.

He led her out onto the balcony, leaving the French doors open in the process. "I want a team at the Honeymoon Suite of the Lexor tonight. I want the woman brought to me. I don't care what happens to the man, I just want the woman."

"But Lex, right out in the open?"

"We can claim that enemies from their country unhappy with the current rulers made the hit. Just do it. I ***must*** have her."

"Alright, Lex, if that's what you want."

"See to it."

Chapter 35 — The Attack

As Lex moved away, Clark took Lois in his arms, and she moved in close as they continued the dance. She whispered to him, "Thank you. You were just in time. That weasel was starting to make a move on me, and I didn't like it. I can't understand it. It was like he couldn't wait to get me into bed. I was just about to let him have it when you cut in."

"I know. I was watching. I know how he feels! I can't wait to get you to bed either. I hurried to finish planting the bugs so that you wouldn't be pushed beyond your limits."

The music ended, there was some polite applause for the band, and they moved over to the refreshment area.

About this time a 'news crew' from LNN arrived to document the evening. It consisted of two women, a camera person and a reporter. They were apparently planning to interview Luthor and were setting up on the other side of them. Clark didn't think much of it until it looked like they were ready to start.

As Clark and Lois started to move out of the way, Clark's superhearing picked up a sound, the sound of a capacitor charging. This was not a sound usually associated with a video cam. He used his x-ray vision to check out the camera. He instantly saw that this was, in fact, a weapon and was worried for Lois.

He heard, "Ready Nell? Shoot." As he heard this he placed himself between the 'news crew' and Lois and shielded her with his body, wrapping his arms around her, and holding her tightly against him. Instinctively he knew that they weren't the target of this attack, but he didn't want to take any chances.

A red beam sprang out from the lens of the 'video cam' and struck Luthor on the arm. Lucille shouted, "Now it's your turn to suffer, Luthor!"

He heard his name and jerked away. When he did, it was with a hole through his right arm the size of a pencil.

The guards were rushing the shooter, and she was knocked off balance. The beam from the laser swung wildly. It hit Clark at his right shoulder and traversed his back diagonally to his left hip. As it did so, Clark's aura flared bright red and expanded to envelop Lois completely. As this happened, Lois also manifested an aura of bright blue which expanded and merged with Clark's red one. At the same time the Star Sapphires she wore began to glow with an inner light brighter and brighter as the laser continued to stimulate their auras. Before the laser beam had passed beyond Clark's body, the red of Clark's aura had completely overcome Lois' blue aura and merged with it until its character was changed. It was now a blend of her blue aura and his red aura manifesting itself as purple for a brief moment before the laser moved on.

Just as the laser had passed beyond Clark, there was a small explosion and a puff of smoke from the weapon. Nell was slightly injured by the explosion and being startled by it, dropped

the weapon. She and her sister were both captured by security after a short pursuit.

In the confusion after assuring himself that Lois was safe if just a little dizzy, since no one was looking that way, Clark scooped up the weapon and supersped out the open French doors to the balcony, flipped the weapon up onto the roof, and returned all in the blink of an eye.

The attack effectively put a damper on the evening, and the attendees rapidly departed.

As the last of the guests were leaving Luthor asked, “Who has the weapon?”

Everyone started looking at everyone else. “Find it! I want that weapon! Search everywhere. Was there anyone missing during the excitement?”

“We were all engaged in apprehending the culprits. It looked like everyone was here though.”

He addressed the head of his security detail, “Pull the security tapes. I want to examine the footage. Have them in my office in half an hour. Mrs. Cox, get my doctor up here to take care of this injury.”

Lois and Clark made it back to the Lexor. Lois was still feeling more than a little dizzy.

Clark brought her a glass of water. Lois reached out and took the glass. When she did, it shattered in her hand. She stared at her hand, dumbfounded. “How did that happen? Was the glass flawed?”

Clark grabbed her hand to check for injuries. There wasn’t a scratch there. He looked back up at her face. She had a scared look. “Clark, I don’t know what’s happening to me. All of a sudden I feel better than I’ve felt in my entire life.”

Calmly he said, “We’ll get to the bottom of it.”

She clapped her hands over her ears as she got a pained expression and said, “Ouch, don’t shout so loud! That hurt my ears!”

“What?????”

“Ouch!”

In a whisper now, “Lois, can you hear me?”

“Yes, but you’re still shouting. Just not as loud.”

Without saying another word Clark, using gestures, indicated that he was going to pack up. Lois nodded her understanding. She started to change. Clark handed her the dark outfit. She nodded her understanding again. She started removing her jewels and placing them back in their case. As she finished and set the jewel case down, it was like she had suddenly put on ear muffs. All the sounds around her were suddenly muted. She stopped Clark and said, “Say something to me.”

He whispered, “Can you still hear me?”

“Just barely. Try a normal tone of voice.”

“Can you hear me now?”

“Yes, I can. What happened to me Clark?”

“I don’t know. It was almost like you had my powers there for a while.”

“Wow, is that what it’s like to have your superhearing? How do you handle it?”

“Practice, when it first ‘kicked in’, it was kinda embarrassing. I could hear some noises coming from my parent’s bedroom that I shouldn’t have. I wonder how you got my power and how you lost it again.”

“Maybe it had something to do with that laser. What did you feel when it hit you?”

“I could see my aura start to glow as it protected me from the beam. That’s never happened before. I also saw your aura glow ... and ... change. I don’t know what color is normal for either of our auras, but mine was red and at first yours was blue. I don’t know how but yours changed from blue to purple, like the red of my aura combined with the blue of yours making it a hybrid. I

wonder what that could mean?”

“There was something I noticed. Reflected in the white of your shirt, I saw a bright light. It seemed to be coming from me, or more specifically my jewelry! It was almost like they were glowing!”

Clark went over and pulled out the jewel box and handed it to her. As soon as it was in her hands, she gasped as she felt a surge of strength and her hearing and eyesight became very acute again. Clark went over and turned out the lights, plunging the room into total darkness since the drapes over the windows were closed. Knowing what had to be done Lois started to open the box. As soon as there was a sliver of an opening, light sprang forth. She then threw the lid completely open and the room was lit by a lambent, phosphorescent or almost a bioluminescent light which pulsed and moved across the surfaces of all of the jewels. Lois couldn’t resist the temptation to reach out and touch the stones. As soon as she did, a feeling of power swept through her. Suddenly her hearing became more acute as did her eyesight. It was almost as if she could look past the surface of the stones and see the power stored in them. She stood there marveling at the feeling of power and the other sensations which accompanied it. Suddenly her hearing locked on to a steady lub — dub sound which she instantly recognized as a heartbeat. She knew it wasn’t her own because she could feel hers, and the rhythm was different. With wonder in her voice she said, “I can hear your heartbeat. Now I know what you were talking about. It’s a comforting sound and puts me at peace. Clark, how is this happening?”

“Whatever that weapon was, it seems to have somehow copied my powers and stored them in the Star Sapphires. When I gave it to the jeweler, he said that it was a unique stone. He had never seen another like it. It has a twelve point asterism instead of a six point. It looks like it’s acting like a battery, storing my powers, and transferring them to you as you touch them.”

“Wow, I could be super powered just like you as long as I wear them?”

“I don’t know. This is all speculation. I think we need to do some tests. What do you say we head out to the farm for a few days? That was why I was packing. If you were being bothered by the noise, I was going to take you where it was nice and quiet.”

“I think that’d be a good idea. We need to test this out. Imagine, you wouldn’t need to worry about protecting me all the time anymore. No more being shot and almost dying. You won’t have to fly me, I could fly myself! Wheeeeeee!” Still in contact with the stones, she floated a foot off the floor and spun around. “Did I just do that?”

Laughing at her exuberance he said, “You sure did! Wow, now you’re a ‘super’ wife in more ways than one! Let’s finish packing so that we can get to the farm. I want to spend the night in ‘our’ bed.”

“Should I try flying myself?”

“I don’t think so. Let’s do some tests first. We need to know what the extent of the copy is and how long it will last. We don’t know if it can be renewed or not. These are all the things we need to discover.”

Since they had found the cause of the problem, if problem it actually could be called, they stayed in their ball finery, finished packing, and checked out of the Lexor. Taking a taxi to the airport they unloaded their luggage and moved into the men’s and ladies rooms to remove their disguises. There they changed into their dark clothes and met back at the entrance where they hailed a taxi to return to 348 Hyperion Ave. From there they could leave for the farm in Smallville with the confidence they were not being tracked.

Five minutes after they checked out of the Lexor, a team of toughs arrived outside the door to the Honeymoon Suite. They

used a general access key to achieve entry. They entered like a team clearing a building in a combat zone. They passed through the sitting room and burst into the bedroom only to find it empty and the bed still made.

The leader pulled out a cell phone and made a call. A female voice answered, "Report."

"The birds have left the nest."

"What?"

"We were too late. They're gone."

"Try to pick up the trail."

"Roger."

To his men, "Head back to base. I have some checking to do."

The team leader went down in the elevator to the desk. He pulled out police credentials and asked about the couple in the Honeymoon Suite.

The clerk checked the book and said, "They just checked out. They had a reservation until Monday, but they left early."

"Thanks." He went out to the doorman.

"Anyone leave within the last hour?"

"Why?"

He pulled out his police credentials again and showed them to the doorman.

"Those are fake! I know the real thing when I see it."

"Okay, how about this." He pulled aside his jacket so that the doorman could see the butt of his gun. "Is this genuine enough for you?"

The doorman blanched. "Okay, don't get hasty. Yeah, a couple left a few minutes ago. They seemed to be in a hurry. I called them a cab, and they asked to be taken to the airport."

The thug handed the doorman a fiver and said, "Thanks. Get yourself a cup of coffee."

He signaled and a car that had apparently been waiting for him drove up and he climbed in. "Airport and be quick about it."

"Airport. Roger."

When they got to the airport, he asked around at the ticket counters to find out where they had purchased tickets and where they were going to. He came up empty.

He pulled out his cell phone and dialed the number again. A female voice answered, "Report."

"The quarry has disappeared."

"What do you mean 'disappeared'?"

"Just that, it's like they vanished into thin air. I followed them to the airport, but they didn't purchase a ticket on any airline, and they are not here in the terminal. They just simply disappeared."

"Report to the office. I'm ***not*** going to be the one to tell Lex."

With a fearful tone he replied, "Roger."

He returned to his car and told the driver, "LexTower."

"Uh oh. Bad news?"

"You could say that. They disappeared."

"Are you sure you don't want to go in the opposite direction?"

"It wouldn't matter. He'd find me sooner or later anyhow. Let's go and face the music."

When he arrived back at LexTower, he took the service elevator to the one hundredth floor and moved through the corridors to the office door. He let himself into the atrium and greeted Mrs. Cox. She looked at him and said, "I'm glad I'm not in your shoes. Go on in, he's expecting you."

Taking a deep calming breath he reached for the doorknob and opened the door.

As soon as Luthor saw him he shouted, "Report!"

"We lost them. It was like they disappeared into thin air."

"What did you say?"

"It was like they disappeared into thin air."

"That's what I thought you said." He leaned over and hit a

switch on his intercom, "Mrs. Cox, bring me the cards from the ball, immediately."

His underling stood there fidgeting. After a few minutes Mrs. Cox entered and handed Lex a stack of invitations. He immediately sorted through them. He quickly found the one he was looking for. He read, "Princess Adeline and Prince Charlot of Kongō."

"I can't believe this! They were right here! Right under my nose and I didn't know. I had her in my arms!"

"Who Lex? Who was here?"

"Don't you see? It's all right here! Adeline is the French for Linda! Charlot is the French for Charles, and Kongō is the old spelling of Congo! It's they ... the couple from the Congo that followed the shipment. That laser! They must have it. Somehow they got it out of the ballroom. Search for it. Look everywhere."

"They're both supposed to be dead, but they are very much alive, and she ... she is a vision of loveliness that I can't get out of my senses. I had her in my grasp, and she slipped away! I still need to find her. She must be mine. I must have her. No other woman will do. Get out of here and find her!"

Not needing to be told twice and happy to be getting out with their skin intact both Mrs. Cox and the strike team leader exited rapidly.

Once back home they repacked. While Lois worked on that, Clark flew up to the roof of LexTower. He looked through the roof and watched while a very thorough search was performed. It was obvious that they were looking for the laser. He retrieved the laser and substituted a voice activated recording device which would receive the transmissions from the wireless bugs. It was securely hidden from casual observation. He returned home with the weapon which he promptly concealed in the hidden compartment which he had planned to use in the future for his uniforms.

Once all of this had been accomplished they headed out for the farm, taking off from the back yard.

Over the next couple of days they tested her powers with the jewels. They found that depending on how many of the jewels she was in contact with at any time determined the level of her powers. They also determined that she didn't have to be in physical contact. All that was needed was that they be within her aura. They also determined that there was an interaction between the gems and the sun. The power stored was being replenished by exposure to the sun in just the same way as Clark's were. To be on the safe side they decided that she should probably limit her use of the powers at night until they had a better handle on how long they would last and how long it would take to recharge them if they were depleted. They ran an experiment where after dark she used her various powers until the gems were almost drained of power.

Performing such tests made for some exciting times. While flying around the farm at an altitude of about a thousand feet, the gems reached a particular energy level, and suddenly she started falling out of the sky.

Unfortunately it happened very suddenly, and Clark was some distance away. Lois was startled and mentally was preparing to scream, /Clark!/. She was just starting to take a breath to call him, but before she could actually vocalize the words, he was at her side, and he caught her. When he did suddenly, he felt rather than saw his aura manifest and the gems began to glow again. It only took a minute for the gems to be restored to their former power, and Lois was able to fly on her own again. They both landed. Lois asked, "Why did you come catch me? I didn't call you."

"Yes, you did. I distinctly heard you call my name."

"No, I didn't! I was about to but had only gotten as far as thinking about doing so. I hadn't even opened my mouth!" She

stopped talking and thought, /Clark! Can you hear me?/

Clark looked at her with an open mouth and said, “Yes, I can. Your lips didn’t move. Are you practicing ventriloquism?”

Lois stared at him and thought, /No I’m not practicing ventriloquism. I’m thinking at you. You try it./

Clark, with a serious expression, stared at her and tried to think at her. /Can you hear me?/

Lois with a big smile on her face thought back, /Yes, I can!/

Clark spoke “Wow, I never expected anything like this.

Neither the other Clark nor Lois ever told me anything about this power. I wonder if he even knows. It sure looks like we can communicate telepathically. I wonder if there is a range limit. We’ll need to try that out. How about this, you stay here, and I’ll start flying, and we’ll talk for as long as we can. When I can’t hear you anymore, I’ll come back.” With that Clark took off in a straight line first gaining altitude so that he wouldn’t be observed from the ground and moving north. He was over the crown of the Earth and starting down the other side when he lost contact. He immediately retraced his path. “Well, it looks like we could be on different sides of the continent and still ‘talk’.”

“That could sure come in handy. Wow, that was unexpected, and it also looks like I can get an immediate recharge from you if I need it.”

“I didn’t notice any drastic change in my energy level. It only took about a minute. I bet if while flying we held hands we could go on forever.”

Lois wanted to wear her jewels at all times, and Clark was not averse to this so it was decided that this would be the case. She would wear them under her clothes and expose them to sunlight as opportunity presented itself to recharge them. She would be able to wear everything but the earrings and tiara under her clothes. The tiara being the largest stone it would be the greatest source of her energy. They finally devised a method of removing the large central stone and placing it in a pouch around her neck so that it rested in the valley between her breasts. She would not be wearing any low cut necklines until they came up with a better method, but this would do for now.

After their weekend they returned to Metropolis, holding hands as Lois flew under her own power.

Chapter 36 — Continuing the Investigation

Two weeks later

Luthor was fit to be tied. He had commissioned several operations in the last couple of weeks, and they had all gone sour. He was becoming more and more convinced that there was a leak in his organization. He had had his offices checked for bugs, and the crew doing the search came up empty. Clark had used his super abilities to hide them in such a way that they couldn’t be found.

After the White Orchid Ball he had gone over the security tapes and hadn’t seen anything. He was musing to himself, “The weapon was lying on the floor, and then suddenly it wasn’t. It was almost as if it had vanished into thin air.” That had brought to mind the Congo incident. “The report from the Congo said that the reporters vanished the same way, and then there was that mysterious flying demon that was seen. Could that same demon now be here in Metropolis, and could it be after me?” He was not superstitious and didn’t believe in demons. He did however believe that people could develop extraordinary powers. There were strong men that could lift tremendous weights; it was done in competition regularly. Certain individuals could run exceptionally fast. Could there actually be someone that could fly? Unheard of but impossible? Time would tell.

The attack on him at the ball had not been a result of anyone from his competitors; it had simply been a couple of loose cannons, disgruntled former employees with a grudge to settle. He had seen promise in the weapon that they had developed and

had cut a deal with them. He wouldn’t press charges if Nell, the brainy one, went back to work for LexLabs. This time she wasn’t going to be a lab tech, she returned as the head of her own lab doing laser research. He still regretted the loss of the weapon she had used on him. He hoped she would be as successful in her new research as she had been with that device. The power demonstrated in that portable unit exceeded the output of most stationary units.

He was still disgusted that he had been unable to determine if the team that had been shot in the Congo had gotten out alive or not. Mrs. Cox had gone to the Brazzaville office of the Daily Planet and had used her wiles on a reporter named Claude Rochert. She had found out that there was a team from Metropolis there following the cargo. All she could get were their undercover names which didn’t help. The names however had corresponded to those reported by the injured man. When he had followed up at the local office, there were no teams then on assignment. In fact there had only been one reporter out of the office currently, and she had been on sick leave apparently suffering from stress related problems. Yet another dead end.

Checking the hospitals had also proved fruitless. The hospitals records were all sealed by executive order. What were they trying to hide? Even the doctors were being tight lipped. They couldn’t find out anything.

The current problems had all started with the Prometheus shuttle sabotage failure. He still didn’t know how they found that bomb. It was designed to be small and simply cause a system failure which in turn would cause the explosion that would destroy the shuttle. ‘An anonymous phone tip’ EPRAD had called it. The name ‘Charlie’ had been mentioned. The same name again and again and again. Who in his organization had leaked the information? The number of possibilities was vanishingly small and getting smaller all the time. The bomb maker and the EPRAD tech that had planted it had both been dealt with. A couple of convenient accidents had taken care of them. The one had ‘accidentally’ detonated a bomb he had been fabricating. The EPRAD tech had unfortunately been in an auto accident and hadn’t survived. That just left him, Nigel and one other, the EPRAD manager that he had bought off. He would have to see to that little detail shortly.

He hit a switch on his intercom, “Nigel, attend, if you please.”

Nigel knocked and heard, “Come.” He opened the door and entered.

“Nigel, we have a problem I need you to take care of. The EPRAD manager, John Crawford, could have an attack of conscience at any minute. In fact he may have been the anonymous caller that tipped them off about the bomb. I need you to take care of him immediately. Make it look like an accident as usual.”

“Yes sir, right away.” Nigel turned and left.

Luthor depressed another key on the intercom, “Mrs. Cox, if you please.”

A few seconds later Mrs. Cox entered without knocking.

“Mrs. Cox, please contact the head of my insurance group and have him come to the office tomorrow night at 10:00 PM. We need to talk about the receivables from his operation for the last quarter. Then call Madam Mitzi Daphne and have her come in at 11:00. Do you mind a late dinner, my dear, say about 11:30?”

“Not at all Lex.” She turned and with a saucy swaying of the hips she left the office.

Clark had started picking up the used tape and loading a new blank on a regular schedule just after dark. He and Lois would generally listen to it as soon as he got it home. They had gotten a kick out of an earlier recording.

[The weapon was lying on the floor and then suddenly it

wasn't. It was almost as if it had vanished into thin air. ... The report from the Congo said that the reporters vanished the same way, and then there was that mysterious flying demon that was seen. Could that same demon now be here in Metropolis, and could it be after me?']

They had laughed together at that one.

Most days there had been little or nothing of interest to them on the tapes; however, a couple of days after that previous episode, Clark picked up the recording; they listened to it when he got home, and when they got to the following conversation, they perked up.

[*'Nigel, we have a problem I need you to take care of. The EPRAD manager, John Crawford, could have an attack of conscience at any minute. In fact he may have been the anonymous caller that tipped them off about the bomb. I need you to take care of him immediately. Make it look like an accident as usual.'*]

Lois was the first to react. "Okay, now we have a name. We need to get to him and see if we can get him to turn on Luthor."

Clark, ever the voice of reason said, "Yes, but I think we are going to have to go to the police with this."

"How can we? We don't know just who Luthor has in his pocket."

"There is one individual. I worked with him in the other universe. I can only hope that he has the same integrity here in this universe, Detective Lieutenant Henderson. He's a good man and a good cop in the other universe."

"I guess it's worth a try. How do we approach him?"

"Let's go to his office tomorrow morning. It's in the twelfth precinct fairly close to the Planet building," Clark suggested.

"Okay, let's do it. Do you think we should give Perry an update? We've been covering a lot of little stuff. At least most of it has made the front page, but it's just that — little stuff. I would be willing to bet that he's chomping at the bit to get this expose out."

"No, not just yet. I think Perry will wait as long as we need him to. The thought of the paper or rather reporters on staff getting a Pulitzer is a big enough incentive for him to be patient. As far as Henderson, let's make sure of him first."

The next morning they entered the twelfth precinct and approached the desk Sergeant. Reading his name from his name tag, Clark addressed him. "Good morning, Sergeant Tartaglia, I'm Clark Kent and this is Lois Lane. We're with the Daily Planet, and we'd like to see Lieutenant Henderson, please."

The Sergeant picked up the phone and dialed an extension. He spoke a few sentences and laid it back down. He pointed down a hallway. "Down that corridor, third door on the left."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

They went to the indicated door and Clark knocked. They heard, "Come in!"

Clark opened the door and allowed Lois to precede him into the office. Henderson indicated the chairs in front of his desk and said, "Make yourselves comfortable." When they were seated he asked, "Okay, now what can I do for the members of the fourth estate?"

Lois took the bull by the horns and started in. "Detective Henderson, we have evidence that a murder is about to be committed ... "

"You ***what*???**"

Keeping calm she repeated, "We have evidence that a murder is about to be committed. We have a recording of a conversation. It gives all the information you need to prevent it." Glancing over at Clark, she saw him nod indicating that she should carry on. "We were thinking that if we played the recording for the intended victim he might decide to testify against the

perpetrator."

Clark took over at this point, "We have been monitoring a particular office because we have suspected the owner of being involved in criminal activities. This is the first real break we've had. Here, listen to this." Clark pulled out a miniature recorder, placed it on Henderson's desk, and hit the play button.

[*'Nigel, we have a problem I need you to take care of. The EPRAD manager, John Crawford, could have an attack of conscience at any minute. In fact he may have been the anonymous caller that tipped them off about the bomb. I need you to take care of him immediately. Make it look like an accident as usual.'*]

Henderson asked, "Could I hear that again?" Clark rewound the tape and played it again. When it was finished the second time, Henderson sat back and steepled his fingers. "I think I recognize that voice. I couldn't be right, could I? Lex Luthor?"

Lois replied, "Right the first time. We've been investigating him for some time. He was behind a gun running operation in the Congo. When we found that out, we started looking into his operations here stateside. We believe that this is just the tip of the iceberg. We need to save this guy and get him under wraps until we can get more on Luthor. We want to put Luthor away permanently!"

"This sounds like a very good start. Let me get Sgt. Adams ... "

"Are you sure you can trust him? We don't know if Luthor has co-opted anyone in the force," Lois inquired.

"If you had questions about the police being bought off, why did you come to me?"

"Let's just say I had a hunch about you being a straight arrow and leave it at that," Clark replied.

"Well, thanks for the vote of confidence, I think. Adams is a good man. I trust him."

"That's good enough for us. Do you want us to go along?" Lois asked

"Yes, if you wouldn't mind. Since you're the ones that made the recording, you can fill in the details if Mr. Crawford has any questions."

"We'd be happy to," Clark replied for both of them.

Henderson picked up his phone and dialed an extension. When it was answered he said, "Adams, get a car and meet me around front. We have an errand to run. ... No, a plain car not a black-n-white. ... We'll have a couple of passengers, so don't pull one of those sub-compacts the city just got to save on gas. ... Yeah, a Crown-Vic will do. Meet us out front in five minutes." He hung up the phone.

"This time of the day I guess we'll find him at EPRAD, so I don't think we need to worry about a home address." Henderson said.

"I just hope we're in time. Luthor's thugs can act pretty quickly," Lois said expressing her concerns.

Henderson tried to reassure her, "We can only hope that an accident takes a little longer than twelve hours to arrange."

They exited the building and waited for Adams. When he pulled up, they all entered the car. Henderson introduced Lois and Clark to Adams and then told him where they were headed. He pulled out into traffic and started the drive.

While they were in route, Henderson turned around in his seat to ask, "What else do you have on him at this point? Anything I should be aware of?" He was deliberately vague in front of Adams. Not because he didn't trust him but still playing his cards close to the vest.

"As we develop more leads, we'll keep you informed. Honestly, this is the first big break we've had, and we came straight to you." Clark reassured. "We hope that this witness will break at least this part of the story, though we are hoping for more. What type of evidence would be the best?"

“Video tape with audio, time stamped and marked so that it can be proved that it wasn’t tampered with would be the best.”

“We’ll see what we can do,” Clark replied.

The rest of the trip Clark and Lois were speaking in low tones, planning their strategy. “It looks like the audio isn’t going to be enough. We’re going to have to figure a way to get the video that he wants. Do you think we can get a video cam?”

Lois replied, “There should be one in the equipment locker. We can ask Perry if we can sign it out when we get back.”

When they arrived at the EPRAD complex, the four of them went into the lobby, and Henderson approached the receptionist. He pulled out his ID and said, “Detective Henderson, Homicide. I’d like to speak with Dr Crawford, please.”

The receptionist called and asked him to come to the lobby to meet some ‘visitors’.

When he arrived Lieutenant Henderson identified himself, “Dr. Crawford, Lt. Henderson, Homicide. Is there somewhere we can speak, privately?”

Crawford checked with the receptionist and then led them to conference room 6. Once the door was closed he turned to them and asked, “What is this all about?”

Henderson nodded to Clark to begin. “Dr. Crawford, we have evidence that you were bribed by Lex Luthor to cooperate in the destruction of the Prometheus Shuttle.”

Crawford blanched and stuttered, “Wha, What did you say?? I never ... I wouldn’t ... “

“Dr Crawford, our evidence is incontrovertible, and we are not here to have you arrested for this. We came here to try to save your life. Here, I want you to listen to something.” Clark pulled out the mini-recorder and hit play.

[‘Nigel, we have a problem I need you to take care of. The EPRAD manager, John Crawford, could have an attack of conscience at any minute. In fact he may have been the anonymous caller that tipped them off about the bomb. I need you to take care of him immediately. Make it look like an accident as usual.’]

If they thought John Crawford had gone pale when they first started talking, that was as nothing compared to his reaction to the recording. He was as white as a sheet and beads of sweat popped out all over his forehead. He blindly reached for and almost literally fell into a chair.

In a broken tone he said, “What do you want to know? I’ll cooperate fully.”

Henderson took over. “First I need you to notify your boss that you’re going on an emergency leave. Tell them you had a death in the family or something and that you’re leaving immediately. We’ll put you in a safe house. While there you can give us the details that you know of Luthor and this operation.”

“Gladly, I never realized exactly what was planned until it was actually stopped, and when I found out the extent of the sabotage, I was appalled. I thought that he simply wanted to delay or disable the shuttle, not destroy it with everyone on board. All those people that could have died, and I would have been part of it.”

“Okay, let’s go. I’d suggest that you go back to your office and call your supervisor to tell him about leaving and meet us outside. We’ll wait for you. As of this minute you’re in protective custody. Actually, Adams, why don’t you accompany Dr. Crawford while he goes to his office. We don’t want anything to happen to him between now and the trial. He could be a key witness.”

Adams nodded, and he and Dr Crawford exited. Lois, Clark, and Henderson returned to the car to wait.

While they were waiting Henderson turned to Lois and Clark and said, “All in all, I’d say this was a good day’s work. I hope you can get me some more dope on Luthor. I’d like nothing better than to nail him.”

Clark picked up a petroleum type odor when a breeze hit him from across the parking area. He pulled his glasses down his nose slightly and scanned the parking lot. He noticed a small pool of fluid under a blue Pontiac.

A couple of minutes later Adams and Crawford joined them at the car.

Clark addressed Dr. Crawford, “What do you drive?”

“Blue Pontiac, why do you ask?”

“Bill, you may want your people to go over his car. Luthor wanted Dr. Crawford to have an accident. Failed brakes would be just his style.”

If Dr. Crawford had regained any of his color since leaving the conference room, he lost it again as he looked over at his car.

Henderson said, “I’ll have the car towed to the police garage to give it a going over. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Just doing my job.”

Chapter 37 — Foiling Luthor’s Plans

When Clark picked up the recording that evening and they had listened to it, they knew that they were going to have a busy night. After their conversation with Henderson they knew that he wanted video to go along with the audio.

“We know that Luthor has two meetings scheduled for tonight. How are we going to get video?”

“I think a little super surveillance might be in order, what do you think?”

“Now you’re talking! I get to try out my new powers? What are we going to do?”

“I think we need to hide what we’re doing so I think that a black outfit would be the dress code for the night. We need to get the camera from the equipment shop. To be sure that the audio matches the video, we should have a wireless mic for the camera. I’ll hover out of sight with the camera while you get the mic in place.”

“I could fly to the roof and reach down and use the suction cup appliance to stick it to the top of the window. Sounds like fun.”

That night it went without a hitch. They recorded the meetings with the head of the protection rackets and prostitution.

The next morning they actually watched what they had.

[(Voice 1 — Luthor) “Your revenues have been falling off for the last quarter. What seems to be the problem?”]

[(Voice 2 — Lizzie Banks) “The customers have been giving my people a hard time. Like they’re not scared that something bad will happen any more. It’s been a long time since someone suffered.”]

[(Voice 1) “Then it’s about time you made an example of someone, don’t you think? Who’s been the leader of the resistance?”]

[(Voice 2) “That would be Jake’s Flowers on Woodbine.”]

[(Voice 1) “Do you think a little fire would change his mind?”]

[(Voice 2) “I’ll see to it.”]

[(Voice 1) “See that you do, and I expect to see an increase of twenty percent in your revenues by the end of the quarter.”]

[(Voice 2) “You got it, Mr. Luthor. Piece of cake.”]

[(Voice 1) “It had better be. There are plenty of others within the organization that would like your position. Do I make myself clear?”]

[(Voice 2 — very subdued) “Perfectly.”]

[(Voice 1) “You may leave now and get to work.”]

[(Voice 2) “Right away, Mr. Luthor; right away.”]

Lois put the machine on pause and said, “Well, what do you make of that?”

“I think that we need to do a little protecting ourselves. Let’s ride by Jake’s this afternoon and see what we might be up against.”

Lois nodded and pressed play again. She fast forwarded

briefly until they saw the Madam enter.

[Voice 1 — Luthor] “Mitzie, nice to see you.”

(Voice 2 — Mitzie) “What did you want to see me about, Lex?”

(Voice 1) “Always jumping right to the point, no small talk. ‘How are you this evening, Lex? What have you been doing lately? Have you been enjoying the girls I’ve been sending over?’ No, right to the point. Okay, here’s the point. Your girls haven’t been generating enough revenue. They either need to start charging more or start shortening the time per john. Do whatever they need to enhance his experience so that he finishes quicker, and they can move on to the next client.”

(Voice 2) “The main problem is that in the last group that was supposed to show up two of them failed to make an appearance, and then in the last couple of weeks I’ve lost a couple of my girls.”

(Voice 1) “Lost them, how?”

(Voice 2) “Suicide. I’m sure you’re aware of the problem. The girls that come to me don’t come willingly. They are coerced into it. You fire them and then black list them so that they can’t get any other work. Then you have someone suggest that they contact me for work. Girls that come to me that way are not happy. They are selling their bodies, not because they enjoy it and are making money as an added benefit. These girls are forced into selling their bodies. They are no better than sex slaves, and you know it. You put them in that position. These girls I just lost were torn up with self-loathing because of what they were doing to survive. It got to the point that they couldn’t handle it any more, so they took the only way out that they could see.”

(Voice 1) “That’s all well and good, but it doesn’t solve the problem of your decreased revenues. I would suggest that your girls take less time with each john so that they can service more each night.”

(Voice 2) “You know my girls don’t do that. My house has a reputation for satisfying the customers and that means that the girls spend time with them before and after. It’s not ‘Wham, Bam, Thank you, Ma’am’ and off to the next customer. We have a reputation to maintain.”

(Voice 1) “Then increase your prices! I don’t care how you do it; I just expect to see a twenty percent increase in revenues by the end of the quarter. Shall I have two or three new girls sent over?”

(Voice 2) “Lex, you haven’t heard a word I’ve said have you. The girls that come to me that way don’t fit in. They are not happy with what they are doing. It’s only a matter of time until I lose more of them. Personally, I don’t like having that on my conscience. I don’t think I could handle much more of this. These are good girls being forced into doing something that they would never normally consider. Every time they sell themselves, they die a little inside. It doesn’t take too much of that before they are ready to die for real.”

(Voice 1) “I don’t care how much they die inside. If they kill themselves, that’s their problem. I’ll send some more girls over by the end of the week. I still expect to see a twenty percent increase in your revenues.”

(Voice 2) “Lex, you have got to be kidding. Even if you do send me some more girls, they will be raw. I’ll need to train them. They wouldn’t start turning tricks for a week or week and a half.”

(Voice 1) “Why would it take so long? Their women aren’t they? Sex is a natural act. Any woman is capable of performing the act. All she has to do is spread her legs, and the john will do all the work.”

(Voice 2) “If that’s all you expect, then I’ll send an inexperienced girl to you the next time you ask for one. I’m sure that you will see the difference immediately.”

(Voice 1) “Don’t threaten me, Mitzie. I’ll expect to see that twenty percent increase by the end of the quarter.”

(Voice 2) “Lex, a twenty percent increase is impossible.”

(Voice 1) “How would you like to back to being ‘one of the girls? You’ll manage the increase, or you’ll be spending a lot more time on your back with your legs spread to make up the difference. Do I make myself clear?”

(Voice 2 — in a subdued tone) “Perfectly.”

(Voice 1) “You can see yourself out, and send my secretary in as you leave.”]

Lois was the first to comment. “He is so callus. He is destroying the lives of those girls, and he doesn’t care! All he cares about is the revenues to be derived. We’ve got to stop him. This is unconscionable! I wonder how many girls he has treated this way and ruined their lives? Wow, and that madam, he sure has her under his thumb. Do you think we could get to her?”

“I don’t see how.”

“Maybe I could go undercover, so to speak.” She smiled at her double entendres.

He got a shocked expression on his face which turned to stern conviction as he said, “No way is my wife going anywhere near a bordello. What if something happened?”

“You’re forgetting, I’m super powered now.”

“All the more reason for you not to. Just imagine if something were to happen. You might be exposed, and we’re not ready for that yet.”

Tongue firmly placed in cheek she replied, “But I thought that was what the girls there did, expose themselves.”

He replied, “You can expose yourself to me anytime you want.”

As soon as he said it he regretted it because she reached up and started unbuttoning her blouse. He reached over and stilled her hands. “I mean in private. Not here in the newsroom.”

She looked around. She was enjoying his discomfiture and continued, “We’re in the conference room and the blinds are drawn.”

“But someone could walk in on us any second!”

With her characteristically wicked little grin she said, “We’d hear them in plenty of time!”

“I don’t know about you, but my superhearing doesn’t always work the best while we’re ‘active’ if you know what I mean. You distract me too much.”

“Okay, spoil sport. We can save it for later at home.”

He let out a relieved sigh. “Okay, now, what can we do about the prostitution?”

“I don’t know. Could we get the girls better paying jobs? Nah, I don’t think so. How about this — we get them to organize! Form a union, other than the one they do so much of. Maybe we could have them go on strike! Better wages and fewer johns. How does it sound?”

By this time Clark was laughing so hard his sides were starting to hurt. She looked at him. “I’m serious!”

Seeing her mood he tried to settle down. He finally succeeded. “How are we going to convince them to organize?”

“I don’t know just yet. Let me give it some thought, and I still think I could go undercover.”

They drove by Jake’s that afternoon to get the lay of the land and noted that it was on the ground floor of a high rise building, so it was going to be difficult to protect from fire. They’d have to think of something though and do it quickly.

Chapter 38 — Enter the Karate Kid

That night they dressed in black again. Lois was on the roof of the building across from Jake’s, and Clark was on the roof of Jake’s building.

At 10:30 PM a car drove past, and from the back window a Molotov cocktail was thrown through Jake’s window. Lois used her telescopic vision to get the license plate while Clark handled the fire.

Clark opened the roof access door to the stairwell. He then used his heat vision to weaken the structure of a municipal water tank that was housed on the roof. When the seam ruptured water started to pour from the tank. The access it found to flow downhill was the roof door. Hundreds of gallons of water rushed down the stairs. Since the florist shop was in the lobby, the stairs led straight there. The water flooding the lobby extinguished the walls where the flames had caught. The street doors were closed and bolted but could not long stand against the pressure of the water and burst open allowing the water and gasoline residue to flow into the street and down the storm drain.

As soon as the water had started to flow, he had flown across the street and joined Lois. “That worked out well! Jake might have a little water damage, but that’s nothing compared to what a fire would have done. Good job!”

“Did you get the license plate?”

“Sure did. That’s another piece of information to give to Henderson.”

“Let’s go home.”

Getting that wicked little grin again she said in a very sultry tone of voice, “Ummmmmm, that sounds good! Then I can expose myself to my husband in privacy!”

“Any time my love. Any time.”

They flew off hand in hand.

The next day they did some interviews and wrote up the incident for the Planet.

“FIRE BOMB FIZZLED”

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

“An apparent attempt to firebomb a business last night failed because of a leaky water tank. ...”

Two days after the police had picked up Crawford and placed him in protective custody, Clark had a call. “Daily Planet, Clark Kent.”

“Hello, Kent. Henderson here. Just thought I’d call and let you know we towed Crawford’s car in to the garage. You’re hunch was correct. The brake lines had been cut. He never would have made it home in one piece. As soon as I told Crawford, he started singing like a canary. He ID’d the tech that was co-opted. He’s already dead. Funny thing is it was the same MO. We were able to find the car he was driving at the time he was killed. Since we had found the sabotage that was done to Crawford’s car, we knew exactly where to look and sure enough. I think we can tie the two together. Thanks for the heads up.”

Lois had seen Clark’s expression as he had been listening and had moved over to his desk. She perched on the corner and listened in on the conversation. As he had been speaking, she had gotten a very satisfied smile on her face. She put her index finger to her mouth to moisten the tip and made a stroke in the air indicating a point for our side.

“Don’t mention it, Lieutenant. Looks like the case against Luthor is slowly building. By the way we would like you to check on a license plate for us. It’s to a car used in the firebombing of Jake’s Flowers on Woodbine. New Troy HSU-168. We found a witness that got the plate and gave it to us.”

“Thanks, Kent. I’ll run it through DMV. Anything else you can tell me?”

“Yeah, look for an increase in prostitution. We don’t know exactly how it will manifest. Could be that johns will be paying more for less, but you may be seeing more aggressive solicitations. Could you possibly do a sting to get a lot of them off the streets?”

“I’ll look into it. Thanks again. I’ll be in touch.”

With a pout Lois said, “I still think that we could unionize the girls.”

Clark laughed, “How do you unionize people in an illegal activity? Honey, I know that if anyone could do it I’m sure you

could, but I think it’s best to let the police handle it, and I don’t want you down there getting picked up along with the hookers. The police wouldn’t care if you claimed to be a union organizer. As far as they would be concerned, you’d be just one of the girls.”

That night when Clark picked up the tape, they listened to it. The first section started with Luthor calling for Mrs. Cox.

[(Voice 1 — Luthor) “Mrs. Cox, attend me please.”

(Voice 2 — Mrs. Cox) “Right away Lex.”

They heard the door open and close.

(Voice 2) “What is it, Lex?”

(Voice 1) “Have you identified the girls that we are going to ‘send’ to Mitzi for employment yet?”

(Voice 2) “Yes, I’ve identified four girls that would be good candidates. None of them have family, at least not locally, that they could fall back on financially. I don’t think any of them have steady boyfriends either. At least a couple of them have high car loan payments. If we take over the car loans, we can have our agent suggest a new job for them when they can no longer afford the payments.”

(Voice 1) “You said a couple of them; what about the other two?”

(Voice 2) “One of them is sending money home to help an ailing parent pay medical bills. If her source of income were to dry up, she would feel the pressure to get some other source of income. There is no immediate pressure that could be brought to bear on the fourth.”

(Voice 1) “Well we have three just about definite and one possible. Not ideal, but let’s proceed with the action anyway.

Thank you for the report. You wouldn’t mind staying late tonight to take some ‘dictation’ would you?”

(Voice 2) “Any time, Lex.”

(Voice 1) “Good, have the chef prepare a dinner for two.”]

Lois was absolutely livid and as a result she hit the pause button so hard she almost smashed the recorder. “Clark, I ***have*** to go undercover! We ***have*** to save those girls. I can pretend to be one of the girls Luthor sent over. You heard Mitzi, she wouldn’t expect me to start turning tricks for a week to a week and a half, and in that time I should be able to get the girls stirred up and get the new girls out of there. If she expects me to start any earlier, we can arrange for you to be the john, and I’ll just act very picky when it comes to partners. We can talk to Perry and arrange for the Planet to put the girls we get out in hiding, and we can talk to Bill, and they can be protected as witnesses. They could be very important to the case.”

Clark knew by how fired up she was that there was no way he would be able to prevent her from following through on her plan. Just like that night on the wharf in Pointe Noir, he knew when he had to simply give in. “Okay, but I’m going to keep a constant check on you.”

Clark restarted the tape. When they heard what the next section consisted of, they couldn’t help but laugh.

[(Voice 1 — Luthor) “Explain yourself. What happened?”

(Voice 2 — Izzie Banks) “I don’t know. It was some kind of freak accident! Just as the fire started taking hold, the water tank on the roof sprung a leak. The water flowed down the stairs and put the fire out.”

(Voice 1) “You know that failure is ***not*** an option. Once is an accident. Twice is failure. What are you going to do to make up for this?”

(Voice 2) “Traub’s Market over on Shuster. I think a small bomb might teach them that they need insurance.”

(Voice 1) “Okay, but don’t fail me again. You may go now.”

(Voice 2) “Don’t worry, Mr. Luthor. We won’t fail this time. Just you wait and see.”

(Voice 1 — Losing patience assuming a threatening tone)

“See to it that you don’t. Now leave!”]

“Traub’s over on Shuster. We’ll need to keep a check on it. I wonder if it’ll be a drive by like Jake’s or if it’ll be planted.”

“We’ll have to watch out for both possibilities.”

The next night they ‘staked out’ Traub’s the same way they had Jake’s. This time however as they watched a car passed, and as it did, a bomb was tossed through the window. Clark, moving faster than the eye could follow, entered the store through the back door and finding the bomb on the floor, severed the wires leading to the detonator. He then exited the same way he had entered. He joined Lois on the opposite roof. “Did you get the license?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know how much good it’s going to do. It looked like the same car, but the license was different. They must be stolen plates.”

“Oh well, we’ll report it to Henderson anyway.”

The next day they interviewed the police and people at Traub’s.

“WINDOW FOILS BOMB PLOT”

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

“An attempt to bomb Traub’s Market last night was foiled when the glass window the bomb was thrown through severed the wires to the detonator. . . .”

Luthor read these headlines and went livid. The incompetents within his organization had to go. They couldn’t even make a bomb that would work the way it was supposed to. He depressed a key on the intercom, “Mrs. Cox, call Izzie and tell him to be in my office at 10:00 PM.”

“Yes, Lex.”

“Then I want you to call Frank Baxter. Tell him to be here at 10:15. I’ve got a job for him.”

“Yes, Lex.”

That night Clark and Lois were in surveillance mode. They were recording as Izzie arrived. They caught it all on tape as Luthor told him that he was ‘disappointed in his performance’. His voice was full of menace as he said this.

[(Voice 2 — Izzie) “Mr. Luthor, it was a freak accident. It couldn’t happen again. Trust me.”

(Voice 1 — Luthor) “There have been too many freak accidents where you’re concerned.” Luthor pulled a gun and held it on Izzie. With his other hand he reached over and hit a key on his intercom. “Mrs. Cox, send in Frank Baxter.”

(Voice over intercom) “Right away Lex.”

Baxter entered through door.

[(Voice 1) “Frank, I want you to deal with a little problem for me. Please dispose of Izzie. He has failed me for the last time.”

(Voice 3 — Frank Baxter) “What ever you say, Mr. Luthor.” Frank pulled a gun.

(Voice 2) “Mr. Luthor, please, give me another chance. Things like that couldn’t happen again!”

(Voice 1) “You have had two chances already. Do I need to sit by and watch you fail again, I think not. Frank?”

(Voice 3) Frank gestured with his gun as he said, “Let’s go, Izzie. I’ll make it quick and painless.”] Frank let Izzie out the door.

Lois flew over to Clark. “What do we do now? He could be a valuable witness. We can’t let Frank kill him.”

“Let’s stash the camera on the roof, and then we’ll follow them. Maybe we can think of something on the way.”

Lois and Clark picked up the two men as they exited through a back entrance to Luthor Tower and got into a car. By this time Izzie’s hands were handcuffed behind his back and his jacket pulled down around his elbows. They followed the car until it entered an auto reclamation yard. Frank drove the car, an old sedan, into a crusher and got out. Just as he was about to lean in

and deliver the coup de grace, a single bullet to the head, he was tapped on the shoulder.

He spun around and was confronted by a guy all dressed in black with a black ski mask. He brought his gun to bear. “Who are you?”

“I’m a friend to those in need.” Nodding his head in Izzie’s direction. “I think he needs a friend right now.”

“Oh yeah, well maybe he needs company more than he needs a friend. Care to join him?” Moving his gun indicating that he should get into the car.

“I’d rather stay right here if you don’t mind.” Clark assumed what was obviously a karate relaxed ready stance.

Frank observed this and laughed, “You think that karate will keep me from shooting you? Try **this**.” He pulled the trigger.

Clark made a pretense of dodging the bullet and made it look believable. Before Frank had a chance to fire another round, Clark was on him and had taken his gun from him. “I think that my Karate is adequate to the task. I don’t have to depend on a gun while you derive your power from your firearm. Without it what can you do? On the other hand I can do plenty, like this!” Clark reached out and like making a light rap on a door, knocked Frank on the forehead, knocking him out. This was all done for the benefit of Izzie who was watching the entire scene.

Clark pulled out a burner cell phone and called the police. He knew that Henderson wasn’t on duty, so using his Superman voice he asked that the desk forward the call to his private number which they did. Still using the Superman voice he said, “Detective Henderson, I have a present for you. Come to Metropolis Auto Recovery. You’ll find Frank Baxter and Izzie Banks. I think that Izzie may be willing to testify against Lex Luthor. Frank Baxter was about to kill him on Lex Luthor’s order.”

Henderson asked, “Who is this?”

“A friend.” He closed the connection. Then he undid Frank’s belt buckle and pulled his trousers down around his ankles and refastened the belt. He removed his shoe laces and tied his hands behind his back. Izzie was still handcuffed in the back of the car. Clark walked over to him and said, “The police will be here shortly. You know what Luthor was doing to you. It may be in your best interest to talk to the police. If you make a deal, you may wind up with jail time, but that’s better than being dead. Think about it. You almost had a bullet in the brain, and then you would have been melted down for scrap and become part of a new Toyota.” Clark walked away. Lois joined him when he was out of sight of Izzie, and they flew to the top of a pile of junk cars to watch the activity when the police arrived.

The first one on scene was Bill Henderson in his personal car. He drove up and exited his sedan and just took in the scene. Frank was still unconscious, and Izzie was yelling to be let out of the car in the crusher. Henderson just stood there shaking his head trying to figure out what had happened. He pulled out a cell phone and dialed a number. On a desk at the Daily Planet a phone started to ring. After the fourth ring the voice mail picked up. “This is Clark Kent, I’m away from my desk right now. Please leave a message after the beep.” ‘BEEP’

“Kent, Bill Henderson here. We just made the darndest collar. Got a couple of Luthor’s henchmen. Looks like a falling out. I had a call telling me where to pick them up. Someone else did all the work. All I’ve got to do is the clean-up. Call me in the morning when you get this message.” He closed his phone.

Just as he finished his call, the black-n-whites started to arrive.

“All right, load ‘em up and take ‘em in. Put them in holding. I’ll process and interview them in the morning. No paperwork, no papers! No one is to know we have these characters. Got it?”

“Got it, Lieutenant.”

“Okay, get ‘em outta here.” He turned and entered his car and

drove off.

After seeing Frank and Izzie safely bundled off to the hoosegow, they flew hand in hand back to the roof of Luthor Tower and retrieved the camera and then returned home.

Chapter 39 — Lois Goes ‘Undercover(s)’

In the morning the two reporters chose to show up at the precinct rather than call. They were directed back to Henderson’s office as soon as they showed up at the Sergeant’s desk. Apparently Henderson had left word that anytime they showed they were to be sent back automatically. This was a privilege afforded no other reporters.

When they walked in, Henderson was on the phone. He indicated that they should take seats while he finished the call. After he hung up he addressed them. “Looks like we got a big break in the Luthor case last night. It was the damndest thing I’ve ever seen. A call came in to the precinct. The caller asked to have the call forwarded to me on my private line. The caller said that there were a couple of presents for me at Metropolis Auto Recovery. When I got there, I found Frank Baxter trussed up like a thanksgiving turkey and Izzie Banks in the back seat of a car parked in the auto crusher in handcuffs.”

“Bill, after receiving your call this morning, we checked the tape from last night and thought we should bring it over. We got Luthor on tape ordering Frank Baxter to do away with Izzie Banks.” Clark pulled the tape out of his pocket and placed it on Bill’s desk. “Video, date, and time stamped as you requested. Added to the testimony of Frank Baxter and Izzie Banks, it could prove to be quite compelling. This is the original, and we made a copy for ourselves.”

Bill picked up his phone and dialed the extension of the evidence custodian. “Shirley, Bill Henderson. Bring some evidence forms and packaging to my office, will you? I’ve got something for you to lock up. Thanks.” He hung up the phone. “I’ll get this secured so that it doesn’t disappear on us.”

“As we get more, we’ll deliver it to you.”

“I’m not going to ask how you got it because I don’t want to know. You’ve got it, and that’s good enough for me. I just got through interviewing Izzie, and he said that Luthor had ordered Frank to kill him, and he’s willing to testify to that.”

“Our tape will verify all of that.”

“That’s good. Izzie’s also ready to sing about all of the activities he knows Luthor is involved in. The gun we recovered had Frank’s prints all over it, and ballistics has matched the slugs from it to a couple of unsolved murders. He’s ready to cut a deal, and he claims that both jobs were done at Luthor’s order.”

“They both claim that a masked karate expert stopped Frank from killing Izzie and then subdued him. He said that he used some kind of sleeper hold on Frank that put him out, and it must really be effective because he was still unconscious when I got there. I’d sure like to meet this karate guy so that I could shake his hand and thank him.”

Clark and Lois both kept their expressions neutral while Henderson had been describing what had happened. When he had finished, they acted appropriately interested and started taking notes. Bill stopped them. “I don’t want any of this showing up in the papers yet. I want to keep all this under wraps until we have our complete case built.”

“Is there anything you can give us to print, anything at all?”

“No Lois, there isn’t. Frank and Izzie both mentioned a masked karate expert. He was the one that broke up the hit, but I don’t want even that in the papers yet because it could let Luthor know that the hit was stopped.”

They both put their notebooks away. Clark said, “You’re right Lieutenant ...”

Henderson interrupted him, “I think we know each other well enough by now that we should be on a first name basis. Please,

call me Bill.”

“Okay, Bill it is as long as it’s Lois and Clark.” Clark said. “You’re right, of course, Bill. So far we have him tied up to gun running, protection rackets and prostitution. I don’t know about you, but we have heard rumors of a ‘big boss’ that runs the majority of the rackets in Metropolis. It’s beginning to look to us as though we have him identified. What do you think?”

“You could be right, Clark. I want to be sure though. There are a lot more rackets going on out there that we need to tie him to.”

Lois replied, “Bill, you can count on us. We aren’t ready to give up just yet. We want to nail him and nail him but good. We don’t want this fish to slip the hook if we can help it. We’ll keep investigating.”

“Okay, you guys keep doing what you can on your end, and I’ll keep on from my end. Between us we are going to put him away for a very long time.”

Lois and Clark got up. Clark reached out and took Bill’s hand and shook it.

“You can count on us,” Lois said.

“I know I can, Lois.”

As Lois and Clark left, they were walking side by side with Clark’s hand at the small of Lois’ back.

When they got back to the Planet, they went straight to Perry’s office. Clark knocked on his door. They heard, “Come in!” Clark opened the door and ushered Lois in.

Clark started the conversation. “Perry, we just had a meeting with Bill Henderson. The investigation into Luthor is now at a critical stage and is liable to break at any minute. We might have that front page scoop within the next couple of weeks.”

As Perry was listening to this report, he had been getting a broad grin on his face. “That’s the best thing I’ve heard since they announced that the King had won the election. Keep on it you two. I look forward to breaking this story.”

“Chief,” Lois cut in. “Bill said that there is another piece of information that he doesn’t want released yet, but he told us in confidence. He told us that last night a hit was foiled by a masked karate expert. I think we need to keep our eyes open for more from him, whoever he is.”

“Bless my Blue Suede Shoes, a masked karate expert? Some kind of vigilante? Follow up on that. I want that scoop too. Get out of here and get me a story.”

“Right, Chief. We’ll get you what we can.”

Lois spoke up, “Chief, we have something else to ask. We need you to authorize some funds for Operation Rescue.”

“Just what, may I ask, is ‘Operation Rescue?’”

“We just found out that Luthor is also behind the prostitution rackets here in Metropolis. We have information to the effect that he’ll be sending some new girls to the brothel this evening. I’m going undercover as one of the girls. I plan to offer them an out, but we need some place for them to stay until they can testify. Chief, these girls are not doing this willingly, they’re being placed into sex slavery so that Luthor can generate more income.” Lois’ anger was flaring, and Perry could see that she was very intent on this.

“Okay. I’ll take it on myself to authorize this. Somehow I’ll clear it with the suits upstairs. Just get me the story.”

“Thanks, Chief. You’ll get it.”

They exited his office and left the building.

Later — at home

Lois picked out an outfit that she knew wouldn’t be suitable for a brothel but would be appropriate for someone that had been in the secretarial pool and put it on.

“Are you ready for tonight?” asked Clark.

“I think so. How do I look?”

“Like you just left work.”
 “Good. That’s just how I want to look. Now, if I need you,”
 /I’ll call you./
 /Got you. Ready to go?/
 /I think so. Wish me luck./
 /Just be careful. Remember, don’t allow yourself to be
 separated from the jewels./
 /I won’t, don’t you worry about that./
 /If you need a john, just call me, okay./
 /Count on it. Nobody else is going to touch me./

They flew to the vicinity of the brothel. Lois landed in an alleyway close at hand while Clark flew to the roof where he could literally keep an eye on things. As Lois approached the doors, she noted that there were three other girls entering at the same time. All three had a dispirited air about them. There was distinct evidence that a couple of them had been crying. Lois tried to start up a conversation with them, but the women were too sullen to be talkative, so she desisted.

Lois stayed with the other girls all the way to the ‘lobby’ of the brothel which was in the penthouse. They were greeted by Mitzie’s assistant and led back to her office where they were ushered in and directed to take seats on a couch facing the desk.

Mitzie addressed them, “You girls have been sent to me because you need work. You understand the nature of the work in this establishment. If you take good care of your customers, your services could be requested. Repeat business is good business. The more you’re requested, the higher prices that we can charge for your services. Usually we have a training period before you’re sent to the floor, however because of circumstances, we need to put you right to work. Constance will take you to wardrobe where you will be able to pick out something attractive to wear. We’ll start having visitors in about an hour. We deal with only a high class clientele here, so there should be no reason for you to turn down anyone that selects you. Constance’ll give you your room assignments. There may be times that you will have special client, and you will be directed to a different room, but I wouldn’t expect too much of that too soon. Now go with Constance. She’ll get you started.”

/Clark, I’m in trouble. There isn’t going to be a week before I have to start turning tricks. She’s having us start tonight./

/Don’t worry. I heard everything. I’ll be one of the first to arrive. I’ll make a pretense of looking over all of the girls before selecting you. You realize of course that we’ll have to follow through so that they are convinced that you’re doing what is required./

/I look forward to it, as long as it’s with you./
 /I may have to bargain for you for the entire night to keep you safe./
 /My only concern is for those poor girls that I came in with. How can we protect them?/

/Let me call Henderson and explain it to him. Maybe he’ll have an idea./

/Okay, but make it quick./
 Fortunately Bill Henderson had given Clark and Lois his cell number so that they could contact him directly. Clark pulled out his work cell phone to make this call and dialed. He wanted Henderson to know who he was talking to when he answered. Bill answered on the second ring.

“Henderson here. What do you have for me this time, Clark?”
 “Bill, we need some help. We got some information about the prostitution operation here at Mitzie’s.”

“I’ve heard about her place. Never had the pleasure to visit.”
 “Trust me, Bill, you’re not missing anything. Here’s the problem, Lois went undercover, and she’s now in there as one of the girls. We were trying to intervene and rescue some new girls that were being forced into a life of prostitution, but it has backfired. We had heard that they would be in training for a

couple of weeks, but that isn’t going to be the case. They are being pressed into service tonight. I’m going in as a john and will be keeping Lois safe, but we are concerned for these other girls. Is there anything you can do?”

“I would just love to be able to raid that place. You say that these girls are being coerced into this?”

“Definitely.”

“Can you provide any proof?”

“I should think you’d be able to get these new girls to testify if you can get them out of here. We have made arrangements that the Planet will pick up the tab for accommodations for them as long as we get the story.”

“Let me call a friendly judge and call you right back. I should be able to get the warrant and have a squad there within an hour and a half.”

“Please hurry, Bill. Lois really wants to save these girls. They really don’t deserve what is being done to them.”

“I’ll do what I can. Really I’m in Homicide, but since it’s all part of the same investigation, I’ll stretch the point. You just worry about Lois. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Thanks, Bill. See you in a while.”

Clark flew home and donned some makeup, a wig, and full beard. He changed clothes into more formal attire. He was going to be a member of the House of Representatives here on a fact finding mission looking for some relaxation. /I’m on my way back. I’m now Representative Charles King from Nevada./ He flew back to the same alley that Lois had used, walked around the corner, and entered the building. He took the elevator to the penthouse. When he exited the elevator, he was greeted by Constance. “Good evening. How may I help you?”

“I’m looking for some ‘companionship’ for the evening.”

“Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“Will this be kept, ahem, confidential?”

“Of course, discretion is our policy.”

“Well, okay, Charles King.”

“Okay, Mr. King, we have some nice companions for you to chose from.”

“Ah, that’s Representative King, Nevada. I’ll need someone especially discrete.”

“Of course, Representative King. This way please.”

Constance, as she was entering the ‘lobby’ hit a switch on the wall signaling a client which would require special handling. Mitzie came out of her office to greet the visitor.

Constance introduced them, “Representative King, your hostess, Mitzie.”

“I think I’d prefer a younger girl.”

“Oh no, no, no. You misunderstand. I’m the Madam. My girls will be out in a minute. You will be able to pick whomever you want.”

“What are the normal arrangements?”

“We have a standard pricing schedule. We normally charge by the hour. We charge extra for Bondage and S/M. If the girl gets hurt, there is an extra charge added.”

“What would be the fee for all night?”

“That would be \$1200 for an experienced girl. \$1000 for someone less experienced. Constance, please call the girls in.” Constance pressed a button which sounded a buzzer in a waiting room.

The girls all filed in through a door. They were all dressed in revealing costume, some in lingerie and others in abbreviated attire. Lois came in toward the end of the file, and she was dressed in a black teddy and black stiletto high heels which Constance had picked out for her. Knowing that it was Clark that was here as the customer she was very relaxed and feeling especially sexy, and it showed in her attitude and bearing. To make it look good, Clark took his time looking over all the girls then he turned to Mitzie and indicating Lois he asked, “I’m

drawn to this girl. Could I have her for the night?”

“You’re very discerning. Linda is one of our most experienced girls. Unfortunately, that carries a special price tag. Her company for the entire night will cost \$1500.”

“That’s fine. If it’s agreeable with her, I’d like her company for the night.”

Mitzie said, “She’s agreeable, aren’t you Linda?”

“Yes, Mitzie, I’m agreeable.”

“Mr. King ...”

He interrupted, “Just call me Charlie.”

“Ah, yes, Charlie, since this is a special girl and a special night we’ll put you in a special room.” She turned to Constance. “The presidential suite. See to it.” She turned back to Linda.

“Make sure that you do all that you can to please Rep., uh, Charlie.” She turned back to Charlie, “Food and beverages will be provided for your stay.” So saying she returned to her office.

Constance conducted them down a hallway and opened a door allowing them to enter. She asked, “What types of beverages would you prefer?”

Looking at Lois he said, “Red wine?” She nodded. “Red wine. Perhaps some cheese and crackers.”

“I’ll have them sent right in.” She closed the door and left.

As soon as the door was closed Lois threw herself into his arms. Before she had a chance to say anything, he covered her lips with his. /Don’t say anything! Do you hear me?/

/Just barely. In this outfit I couldn’t hide the jewelry. All I have are the earrings and ring./

/I guess that we need to be in contact to talk telepathically then. Without your powers you don’t hear what I hear. This room is bugged./ He broke the kiss and looked around the room as if surveying the amenities. He surreptitiously lowered his glasses down his nose so that he could x-ray the walls. He found a couple of audio bugs and two video cameras. He pulled Lois back into another kiss. /Sure enough. There are two video cams and two audio pickups. I don’t think I want a recording of myself making love to my wife, unless you would like a memento of this evening./

/Let me think about it. That’s long enough. No, I don’t want to perform for a camera. I perform for my husband. I don’t want anyone else seeing us./

/Okay. Just thought I’d ask. I agree with you. I don’t want anyone else looking at you naked. You’re mine to look at and no one else’s./ He directed a couple of well placed narrow beams of heat vision at the video cams. He made a very small hole in the wall, next to the lens aperture and through the case. He fused a couple of wires disabling the camera.

In another room a technician was sitting in front of a bank of monitors. He was watching the high-profile subject with one of the girls when all of a sudden the monitor he was watching went blank. He had a brief impression of a red flare just before it went dark. “Now how the hell did that happen?” <I checked those cameras earlier this evening to make sure they were ready for tonight. That shouldn’t have happened! Oh well. At least we have the other camera. We should still get some usable footage from it. We’ll need it if we want to have any leverage with him.> Just then the second screen went dark. “What the ... That can’t happen! They can’t both go out like that! Something’s going on, and I don’t like it.” He picked up a phone and dialed an extension. “Mitzie, Greg. We’ve got a problem.”

Within a minute of getting the call, Mitzie was in Greg’s room, and he was showing her what he had been able to record from the presidential suite. On both tapes just before the tape went blank there was a red flare which Greg could not account for. Mitzie looked at Greg and asked, “What can we do? This is a high profile target. We have to get something.”

“We still have the audio feeds. You might be able to use that?”

“It’s not as effective as having a tape of the target in a ‘compromising’ position, naked in bed with a prostitute. Lex isn’t going to be happy, but, I guess it’ll have to do.”

Just then over the speakers they heard the beverages and finger foods delivered to the presidential suite. There was a time where all that could be heard was the clinking of glasses and a rustling as the food was being consumed. After a while they could hear the sounds of kissing and moans and groans. Then a female voice said, “You look awfully uncomfortable in that suit. Wouldn’t you be more comfortable removing your jacket and loosening your tie? ... There now, isn’t that better? ... Now let’s undo your shirt a little. ... My, what a strong neck ... It’s hard to see with that beard.” Sounds of more kissing. “I like kissing your neck. Do you like it?”

“How could I help it with someone like you?”

Things seemed to be progressing satisfactorily, so they muted the speakers and allowed the tape to run. Mitzie said, “I’m expecting more customers. Make sure that we don’t have any more equipment failures.” She left.

Chapter 40 — Dan Scardino

Clark had been filling Lois in on what was about to happen. /So Henderson should be here within an hour. Where is your jewelry?/

/In my bag, down the hall./

/Let’s see if we can come up with an excuse for you to go get it. I have it. Why don’t I ask to see your health certificate?/

/But I don’t have one./

/They don’t know that do they?/

/No, I guess they don’t. It might work. I don’t think they lock us in. I should be able to just walk down the hall and get it./

/As soon as you touch your bag, you should have your powers, so it shouldn’t matter what they try once you have it in hand. Try not to reveal what you can do though. Be careful. Okay, here we go. Let’s make it sound good./ He said out loud, “My dear, I hate to interrupt what we are doing to ask something so crass, but could I see your health certificate? I couldn’t afford to take a chance of catching anything.”

“I assure you that I don’t have any diseases.”

“Thank you, my dear, for that assurance, but I would still like to see the actual certificate. If you don’t mind.”

“If you insist. It’s in my bag, down the hall. I’ll be right back.” Lois exited the suite and moved down the hall.

On her way she was stopped by another one of the clients.

The guy that accosted Lois in the hall had apparently already been drinking and was a little sloppy. “Hey, babe, where have you been hiding? Care to join me?”

She responded to him in a sharp tone, “Sorry, I’m occupied. You’ll need to find yourself another girl.” She tried to move past him.

As she did he reached out and grabbed her from behind around the waist and started moving his hands up toward her breasts. She reached down and placed her hands over his. With this move he felt some encouragement and started moving his hands even faster. Suddenly she shifted her grip and grabbed his index finger on each hand and bent them both back. This move got his hands off of her and caused him some pain in the process. She pushed back on his fingers knocking him off balance, neatly dislocating his fingers in the process. He fell backwards, against the wall. She turned to face him and said in a very threatening tone, “Couldn’t you hear, or are you too drunk to understand? I said I was occupied. Now keep your hands off! Got it?”

“Why you, no bimbo hooker does that to Dan Scardino and gets away with it.” He lunged at her.

Lois sidestepped grabbing his right wrist as she did and pulled while placing her right foot so that he tripped over it causing him to hit the opposite wall head first. He slipped to the

floor unconscious.

Looking down at his unconscious form she said, “I told you I was occupied and to find another girl, but you wouldn’t listen to me.” She stepped over the body and hurried down the corridor to the wardrobe room where her things were in a gym style wall locker where she completed her errand. As soon as she had her bag in her hand, she felt her strength and other abilities return in a flood. Just for good measure she stuffed her dress into her bag thinking, <I’ll worry about the wrinkles later, if at all.>

As soon as she finished stuffing her dress into her bag she stuck it under her arm and exited the wardrobe area. When she stepped into the hallway, she saw Constance bending over the unconscious Scardino. Constance looked up and seeing her asked, “Why aren’t you in the presidential suite with your customer?”

By way of reply she indicated her bag and said, “I had to get something to satisfy the customer that I’m healthy.”

Constance replied, “Well, okay.” Indicating the unconscious Scardino she asked, “Do you have any idea what happened to him?”

With a look of utter disdain she replied, “He looks like a passed out drunk to me. Do you want any help with him?”

“No, that’s okay, I can deal with this. You need to get back to your customer.”

Without another word Lois returned to the suite. As she was walking down the corridor she thought, /I had a little trouble./

/I know, I was watching. I figured you could handle it powers or no powers, so I decided that I didn’t need to interfere./

As she closed the door behind herself she thought, /We still have some time until Bill gets here. Shall we avail ourselves of the facilities?/

She didn’t need to see the look on his face to pick up his joy as he thought, /I thought you’d never ask./

She started removing the teddy as he started to unbutton his shirt. /You’re sure you disabled all of the cameras?/

/It wouldn’t hurt for you to double check./

She did a quick scan. She found both of the disabled cameras and both listening devices. She thought, /We could really give them an earful or we could be quiet. What do you want to do?/

/Just be yourself, but remember — Charlie not Clark./

Three quarters of an hour later they heard a commotion outside the room. They both used their x-ray vision to check and saw Bill Henderson and a squad of police in the lobby with Mitzi. They both tuned in with their super hearing to listen to the by-play. Bill was just handing Mitzie a piece of paper, probably a warrant. Mitzie was complaining quite loudly about how this was an illegal raid. Realizing that time was of the essence, they both hurriedly got dressed and exited the room. They moved to the ‘lobby’, and as soon as Bill Henderson spotted them he turned to Mitzie and said, “I am taking some of your girls and their ‘clients’ into custody.

Mitzie was just standing there holding the piece of paper dumbfounded. She couldn’t understand it. Because of Luthor’s influence and the members of the judiciary that he had in his pocket, they had never been able to get a warrant before. Luthor had always taken care of that.

As Lois and Clark approached him, Henderson recognized Lois but not Clark. He assumed that it was Clark because he was with her. He had brought Detective Muggervan from the Vice squad along. Muggervan was taking his cues from Henderson as he said, “Take these two into custody.” In an aside to Lois Henderson said, “Can you ID those new girls you were talking about?” She pointedly looked at the three girls, and Bill nodded his understanding. He pointed to the indicated girls and Muggervan said, “Okay we don’t have room for all of you. You, you, you, and you.” Pointing at the girls Lois had ID’d and Dan Scardino, “Go with these officers.” The girls were directed to

accompany a couple of police women who took them to wardrobe to recover their own clothes before being taken downstairs.

They all went down in the elevator. It was crowded, but Lois didn’t mind as it gave her an excuse to hug Clark all the way down. To maintain appearances Bill had a ‘paddy wagon’ waiting at the front door. The three girls, Lois, and Clark were all loaded into the back of this while Dan Scardino was loaded into a black-n-white.

After the back doors were closed and the driver got the vehicle moving, Lois addressed the three girls. “Did any of you have to ‘perform’ for a customer this evening?”

They each had been feeling miserable. They hadn’t wanted to be there to start with, and then to be picked up in a raid, that was just too much.

Seeing that they were obsessing over the circumstances, Lois sharpened her tone. “Listen to me! Snap out of it! You’re safe now. Luthor isn’t going to harm you.”

That got their attention. At the mention of Luthor’s name they all looked up and at Lois. Lois tried again. “Did any of you have to ‘put out’ for a customer tonight?”

They all shook their heads. One said, “You’re the only new girl that was chosen. I really feel sorry for you.”

Lois laughed and responded, “You don’t need to be sorry for me, this is my husband. We were there to get you girls out before you were degraded by that bastard Lex Luthor. He’s the one behind what happened to you. Tell me, each of you worked for a division of LuthorCorp, didn’t you?”

They all nodded in unison.

“You were all recently fired for no apparent cause?”

More nods.

“Which of you are the two with car loans?”

Two of them raised their hands.

Looking at the third girl, “I guess that leaves you as the one with the ailing parent.”

“How do you know all of this about us?”

“My husband and I are reporters for the Daily Planet, and we have, along with the police, been investigating Luthor. If you girls are willing to testify about what he did to you, we are sure we can get you jobs in the private sector similar to the ones you had. Until the trial the Daily Planet will put you up in a safe location. Are you willing to help us put this sleaze bag behind bars?”

As Lois had been talking, all three of the girls had gone from disconsolate to happy, even eager. All three assured Lois that they would cooperate in any way that they could.

Lois moved up to the front and banged on the wall. A window opened, and Bill Henderson looked back.

“It’s okay, Bill. They are willing to testify. Can you take us to the hotel?”

“You got it.” He closed the window, and they felt the van change direction.

The police van took them to a motel on the outskirts of town, and rooms were arranged. After dropping the girls off at the motel, Bill took Lois and Clark back to the precinct with him. When they walked in, they saw Dan Scardino lounging in the waiting room. Lois got a sour look on her face as soon as she spotted him. As they were passing by, Bill signaled for him to accompany them back to his office. When he did this, Lois’ brows raised almost far enough to be hidden in her hairline.

Addressing Bill in a somewhat angry tone she asked, “What’s he doing here?”

“Lois, allow me to introduce Dan Scardino . . .”

Lois interrupted with an angry tone of voice as she stepped forward virtually nose to nose with Scardino and said, “We’ve met!”

Bill, trying to be the peacemaker replied, “I don’t think so.

This is *Agent* Dan Scardino. I recognized him when we did the raid. In order not to blow his cover, we had to pull him in as well. Seeing him there I would think that means that the FBI is also interested in Luthor. That is, of course assuming that you weren't there for 'relaxation'."

Lois was aghast, "FBI?? That doesn't give you an excuse for pawing me!"

Scardino took a step back and put his hands up defensively. He said, "Sorry, I didn't know. I was undercover and acting a part just as I take it you were. You are more than capable of defending yourself as I can attest. Besides, you sure looked good in that teddy. I would like to see more of you. Would I still have a chance?" He smiled at her as he made this play on words.

Lois put her arm around Clark and said, "Oh, you would, would you? You can forget you ever saw me in that. Allow me to introduce my customer of the evening who just happens to be my *husband*. This is Clark Kent." With a flourish Clark took off his wig, beard, and mustache.

Lois smiled in pleasure at getting Scardino's goat.

More than a little chagrined, Scardino addressed Clark, "Sorry, old man, I didn't know."

"That's okay, but now that you do know, I expect it to be hands off."

Scardino replied, "You really don't have to tell me twice. Besides, I wouldn't want to have met her in a dark alley. I might not have gotten out in one piece."

His statement broke the tension in the room, and they all had a laugh at that line.

Scardino said, "Well it looks like you're already in the process of building a case. We were just starting. Do you want us to take over?"

Bill said "Not on your life! This is an ongoing investigation. Is there anything you can provide to us?"

"As I said, we were just starting. Treasury had noticed fund transfers causing bank loans to shift hands. It had been going on for some time, and we were starting to get curious. It appeared that all the loans belonged to young women. They thought it looked suspicious and passed the information off to us to investigate."

Lois decided to fill him in. "Here's the explanation. Luthor fired girls that had no close family or friends. If they had a loan, he would have it transferred and then used it as leverage to force them into prostitution. Those three girls we took out of there, well, it was their first night. They are all willing to testify."

"If you could provide us with that data, we'd appreciate it," Bill stated.

Scardino replied, "I'll send it over by courier tomorrow."

Reaching out to shake his hand Bill replied, "Thanks, we'll put it to good use."

They shook hands all around, and Lois and Clark headed home.

Once they arrived home Clark suggested, "Let's change into our surveillance outfits and make sure that you have a ski mask. Even though somewhat mystified by this Lois got out her outfit.

While they changed clothes she asked, "What are we doing?"

With a somewhat mischievous look Clark said, "I just thought that it's still early. I thought we'd get Perry that scoop he wanted. Here's what I thought ..."

Chapter — 41 — The Karate Kids Do Their Thing

Later that night — over center city

He hovered hand in hand, watching the not-so-crowded byways of center city. It wasn't too long before Clark observed a suspicious looking character lurking in an alleyway. Using his enhanced vision he saw that the individual was armed with a long bladed knife, not something normally carried by the honest citizen. He said to Lois, "I think I've got one spotted. I'm going

to wait until he has a victim then I'm going to interfere."

"Okay, I'll keep looking for one for me. If I need any help," /I'll call./

"Uh oh. He just spotted a potential victim. I'll be back in a few minutes."

/Clark, be careful, okay?/

/Always. Here I go./

Clark zoomed down and landed just out of sight of the perp and his victim. The perp had forced the victim at knife point into an alley. He heard the perp demand his victim's money and other valuables. He walked around the corner and signaled the victim to keep silence with a finger crossing his lips. When he was standing directly behind the perp he said, "You might just want to find another line of work. This one doesn't have very good prospects of lasting much longer."

The perp spun around and tried to catch Clark with a sweeping cut with his knife. Clark had assumed his karate stance and caught the wrist of the perp's knife hand in his as it came around. Clark then twisted his wrist until the perp dropped the weapon, then Clark then gave him a gentle rap with his knuckles on the forehead. The perp dropped like he had been pole axed. Clark undid the perp's belt and used it to secure his ankles by refastening his belt, then he took out his shoe laces and used them to tie his hands behind his back.

Clark then pulled out his cell phone and called 911.

The dispatcher answered, "911, what is your emergency?"

Clark replied, "I'd like to report an attempted robbery at the corner of Ninth and Siegel. The perp won't be going anywhere, and the victim will wait to be interviewed." As he said this he looked over at the victim to get confirmation. The victim very shakily nodded his assent. "Yes, the victim says he'll wait to be interviewed."

(dispatcher) "Who is this?"

Clark said, "Just a friend." He closed the phone severing the connection. "Thank you, citizen, the police should be here shortly."

The victim obviously shook up asked, "Wh ... Who are you?"

"A friend."

"Thanks, friend."

"Don't mention it."

Clark ran to the end of the alley and around the corner. As soon as he was out of sight, he took off straight up and rejoined Lois high in the air. Looking back down he saw that the victim had followed him to the end of the alley, and when he failed to see Clark when he turned the corner, he stood there scratching his head.

Lois asked, "How'd it go?"

"Piece of cake. The perp didn't know what hit him. The victim will have quite a story to tell to the press. I just hope we can get to him first."

/Oh wow, I just spotted one. Wish me luck. Here I go./

/Good luck, sweetheart. I'll keep an eye on you./

Lois took off in a dive that brought her to the mouth of an alley where she landed out of sight. She heard the perp demand the victim's valuables. She snuck up behind the perp and assuming a copy of Clark's karate stance tapped him on the shoulder. He swung around, but since she was so close with his hand outstretched as it was, he couldn't bring his gun to bear. Lois grabbed his gun hand and squeezed. He dropped the gun, screaming in pain as he did so. Lois gave him a light rap on the forehead which put him down for the count. She said to the victim, "It's over now. You have nothing to fear." She proceeded to immobilize him the same way Clark had done and then opened her phone to dial 911.

Just before she did the victim asked, "Who are you?"

"A friend, just a friend." She hit the call button.

“911, what is your emergency?”

“I’d like to report an attempted robbery. The alley just off of Fifth and Creighton. The perp isn’t going anywhere, and the victim will be here to interview.”

“Who is this?”

“A friend.” She closed the phone severing the connection.

She turned to the victim and said, “You’ll be okay until the police arrive.” She turned and ran to the end of the alley, and as soon as she turned the corner, she took off straight up and joined Clark.

“Good job! I saw the whole thing.”

Lois was very upbeat. “That was fun! Let’s do some more!”

“Okay, let’s move over toward Hobbs Bay and see if there is any activity over there.” Clark reached out and took Lois’ hand as they flew in the direction of the bay. They had gotten into the habit of holding hands whenever they moved together while flying. It served a practical purpose in that it kept the jewels at full charge, but beyond that they both enjoyed it. When they reached their destination, they hovered and looked around.

Almost simultaneously they spotted a pair of robberies going down. The one Clark spotted was already in progress while the one Lois spotted was just about to happen. Clark gave Lois a quick kiss and said, “Be careful.”

She replied, /Go get ‘em tiger. I’ll wait till mine commits to intervene./

They flew down to their respective robberies and dealt with each of them in the same manner as they had the others. They met up again in the air, both of them in high spirits. Clark grabbed Lois and gave her a resounding kiss before they each started surveying the area again. It wasn’t too long before they spotted another pair of crimes. They separated again each dealing with one. As Clark was on the ascent from his most recent intervention, he spotted yet another and immediately changed direction. /Lois, let’s put on a little show. Here’s what I have in mind ... /

He landed out of sight again and approached from behind the perp. He signaled the victim to silence and then confronted the perp. Just as the perp whirled on Clark, Lois came running up.

Lois said, “Charlie, mine didn’t take as long as we figured. Do you need any help?”

As Clark disarmed the perp he said, “No, I don’t think so. He’s going to take a little nap now.” Clark gave him a light rap on the forehead. He went down for the count.

Clark said, “Linda! Why don’t you place the call while I secure him?”

The victim had been watching this interplay and had gotten very interested in what was going on. He watched as Lois pulled out a cell phone and dialed 911. She made the call. They asked the victim to wait for the police and then hand in hand they moved down to the end of the alley. As soon as they rounded the corner, they took off straight up. Once they got up to altitude neither of them could contain themselves any longer. Lois threw her arms around Clark and kissed him soundly.

When they came up for air she said, “That was so much fun, I can’t believe it. Okay, we’ve officially made out debut. What next?”

“That was some show we put on for that guy. He is really going to have a story for the papers. We definitely have to get to him before any other paper. I think that’s enough for one night. If these guys are all part of Luthor’s organization, he’ll be feeling the results of our activity tomorrow. I can’t wait to pick up the recording tomorrow night.”

They flew home had a snack and went to bed.

Next morning — Daily Planet

There was a message waiting for Clark when they got in. “Clark, Bill, call me.”

Clark looked over at Lois and with a little snicker said sarcastically, “I wonder what he wants.”

Clark picked up his phone and made the call. “Henderson here”

“Morning, Bill. We just got in and got your message. What’s up?”

“You’re never going to believe this. The karate kid, actually karate kids have struck again.”

“Karate kids, what do you mean?”

“You remember the guy that saved Izzie, well he struck again only this time it wasn’t just him; he had a girl helping him. They stopped a flock of robberies last night.”

“Bill, can we get copies of the police reports? We’d like to interview the victims.”

“Sure, I’ll have copies made for you. They’ll be ready for you when you get here.”

“We’ll be right there. Thanks for the heads up Bill!” He hung up the phone.

“Okay, grab your notebook. We have some interviews to do and a story to write.”

Later

The front page of the evening edition carried the headline.

KARATE KIDS BREAK UP ROBBERIES

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

“Two karate experts called Linda and Charlie were very active last night foiling robberies all over the city. In each case they interrupted the robbery and subdued the perpetrator. One of the victims described the duo as dressed all in black with ski masks which concealed their identities. In all cases they used some kind of ‘sleeper hold’ on the perpetrator before securing them for the police. ...”

That night when they picked up the tape and listened to it, they found out just how much their activities had bothered Luthor.

Luthor was outraged. He was screaming at his subordinates. First thing he had had a call from Mitzie.

[(Voice 1 — Luthor) “Mitzie, so nice to hear from you.”

[(Voice 2 — Mitzie) “Don’t give me that crap, Luthor. What the hell am I paying you for? I’m supposed to be immune from raids.”

[(Voice 1) “You are!”

[(Voice 2) “The Hell I am! I was raided last night! One of my new girls, Linda, had a high value target. A member of the House, Charlie something or other. They were in the presidential suite when the raid went down.”

[(Voice 1) Luthor’s voice changed dramatically as he asked, “What were those names again?”

[(Voice 2) “What?”

[(Voice 1) Luthor was literally yelling into the phone, “What were those names?”

[(Voice 2) “The girl was one of the new girls you sent over, Linda.”

[(Voice 1) “I didn’t send anyone by that name! What was the other name, the name of the john?”

[(Voice 2) “He called himself Charlie.”

*[(Voice 1) “That’s what I *thought* you said. You say they were in the presidential suite? The one set up to record? I want those tapes! Send them over to me, immediately.”*

[(Voice 2) In a more than somewhat subdued tone she replied, “I can’t.”

[(Voice 1) With more than a little menace in the tone Luthor asked, “What do you mean, you can’t?”

[(Voice 2) With fear in her voice she replied, “The video equipment failed just as they entered the room.”

(Voice 1) “What!!!!!!”

(Voice 2) “All of a sudden, it just quit ... like all of a sudden the cameras went bad.”

(Voice 1) In an enraged tone Luthor screamed, “*Both* of them? And you didn’t think that there was anything *unusual* about that?”

(Voice 2) “Well, yeah, we did but there was no way to correct the problem.”

(Voice 1) “Can you at least describe them to me?”

(Voice 2) “Well, yeah, I guess. Linda was about medium height, good figure, brown hair and eyes. Very attractive. Charlie was very taken with her.”

(Voice 1) “It figures. Describe him.”

(Voice 2) “Well he was tall, six feet or so, dark hair, full beard, glasses. A little older, there might have been a little gray in his hair.”

(Voice 1) Luthor speaking more to himself than Mitzie, “They *are* here!”

(Voice 2) “Who are here? Okay, fine, what are you going to do about this?”

(Voice 1) “Do, what do you mean, what am I going to do? I’m going to do precisely nothing! You’re on your own for now. I’ve got bigger fish to fry.”]

He slammed down the phone.

It didn’t get any better; in fact it was downhill from there. It appeared as though the robberies that they had interrupted had all been all part of his organization

He picked up the latest edition of the Planet. The headline caught his attention. “What the ... Karate kids? Charlie and Linda again???” He hit an intercom switch. He roared, “Nigel, get in here!”

Nigel knocked on the office door. He heard, “Get in here!”

“Look at this! First they are in the Congo following the arms shipment. Then they show up at the White Orchid Ball. Last night they were in Mitzie’s place. Now they’re disrupting our robbery group. I begin to suspect that they could have been responsible for the water tank leak and the bomb failure. I need answers! Find them!”

Nigel had overheard the conversation with Mitzie. “But Lex, we don’t know what they look like. They appear to be disguised all the time. We can’t trust any ID we might get! The description from the Congo could fit almost anyone in their twenties. The description from Mitzie’s has at least the man as somewhat older. Now they are wearing masks and are described as teens! We don’t have anything we can go with.”

“Get out of here and get me something, anything on them. They are a thorn in my side, and I want them removed!”

By the time they had gotten through the entire tape, there was enough stuff on the tape to incriminate him in all of the operations.

They took the tape to Bill Henderson and played it for him. When they finished playing it he said, “Well, I think this could be the final nail in his coffin. We have enough on him along with the testimony of the people we have in custody. I’m going to a judge I trust to get a warrant. Do you two want to go on the bust? It’s your exclusive.”

“Thanks, Bill. What time do we need to be here?”

“Give me two hours, and I’ll have a squad ready to raid Luthor Tower.”

At the appointed time Lois and Clark arrived at headquarters and joined the police squad as they moved out for Luthor Towers.

As they entered the lobby, Bill had the security guard placed in custody so that he couldn’t alert Luthor to the fact of the raid. They all piled into the express elevator and took it to the one hundredth floor where Luthor had his offices. The door to his

office was directly across from the elevator. Bill didn’t bother to knock. He just opened the door and entered followed closely by Clark, Lois, and the police squad.

Mrs. Cox asked, “Can I help you?”

Henderson said, “Jacobs, detain her. She’s an accessory.”

“What do you mean barging in here?”

Jacobs grabbed her but not before she was able to hit a switch on her intercom. “Lex! Police!” she shouted.

Bill charged the door to the office and burst it open. He had drawn his gun as he had charged the door. As the door opened he shouted, “Luthor, you’re under arrest!” True to his training he didn’t just charge through the door instead he dropped as he hit the door and hit the floor rolling into the room. That was the only thing that saved his life. A bullet slug buried itself in the door where his body would have been if he had been still standing. His roll stopped when he was on his stomach. His hands were straight in front of him and pointed in the general direction of Luthor. He shouted, “Drop it Luthor!”

Luthor chose not to heed the order and started to shift his aim to shoot Henderson. The amount that Bill had to shift was less, and he squeezed off a shot before Luthor got lined up. Luthor dropped, the bullet hitting him center of mass, very close to the heart.

Lois pushed through to get to him.

He was dying and he knew it. He said, “How?”

She knelt down close to him and said in a tone only he could hear, “Charlie and Linda send their regards. That’s for all the lives you’ve ruined you bastard.”

As he heard those names, a look of pure hate took over his features as he took his last breath.

Chapter 42 — Superman and Superwoman to the Rescue

Two weeks later

The Luthor expose’ had been front page news for over a week. Word had filtered back that the story was being nominated for not only a Kerth Award but a Meriwether and was in the running for a Pulitzer.

The team of Lane and Kent were still doing follow-ups even after two weeks, but it was beginning to look as though the end might be in sight. The collapse of the Luthor Empire had left the rackets in Metropolis and elsewhere in disarray. The smaller groups were squabbling, and there were ‘strong’ men trying to muscle in and take over at least pieces of what Luthor had previously controlled.

As a result of the investigation and the credit and notoriety brought to the department, Detective Lieutenant William Henderson was promoted to Inspector in a ceremony covered by the press. Prominent among the press corps were Lois Lane and Clark Kent who after the ceremony were among the few that Henderson greeted personally. “I don’t know how to thank you guys. If it wasn’t for you and the work you did on this investigation before you even brought it to me, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Bill, we came to you because we believed you to be an honest cop. We are well satisfied at the outcome. You deserve this promotion. We are just happy to have had a small hand in it.”

“Thanks, Clark. You and Lois are actually the only reporters in this city that give the force an honest break. You report the news fairly and factually which is saying a lot. My door will always be open to you.”

Lois said, “We appreciate that Bill. We always strive to be accurate and fair. That’s kinda our trademark. Oh, by the way, keep an eye on the Planet. Perry is talking about starting a new advertising campaign. He’s going to be billing us as ‘The Hottest Team in Town’ because of this story.”

After another round of handshakes, they took their departure.

In the privacy of their home, Clark and Lois were discussing

the current state of affairs. “Lois, as you know in my ‘old’ reality, I had a public presence as Superman. We’ve been doing some of the things I did when we were breaking up those robberies. It felt good to get back to doing something positive. Even doing it in disguise like that. How do you feel about it?”

“I had never done anything like that before, but I really felt good about what we were able to do. I’d kinda like to keep doing it. The only question is how. You said that before everyone knew that you were Superman. How was that as far as your privacy? Did the press hound you all the time?”

“You have no idea. Sometimes it was almost unbearable. I’ve told you a little about my friends, the other Lois and Clark. Clark uses a costume his mother made him. Mine was patterned after it. The idea was that as Clark he hides out in the open. He wears glasses, loose suits, his hair in a different style and assumes a different attitude when in the Suit. As Clark he’s relaxed, but in the suit he’s very formal and almost stilted.”

“Personally I didn’t see how he was able to pull it off, but Lois seemed convinced that it was effective. I was thinking I could try the same thing. Now that we’ve finished up on Luthor, I think it’s about time to move ahead on this.”

“Can you draw something for me to look at?”

“Sure!” Going over to the desk he pulled out a sketch pad and pencils, some of them colored and started to draw. When he finished, he had a full color rendition of him in the suit. He turned the pad around so that Lois could see it.

“Wow! Doesn’t leave much to the imagination, does it?”

“Well, that actually is another thing about it. The eye is drawn away from the face to look at ‘other’ parts of the body. It helps with the disguise.”

“I’m sure it would! Wow, I can’t wait to see you in it in living color. When can we start working on it? What do you think mine should look like?”

Clark sounded somewhat shocked as he asked, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Why not? I have your powers, I’ve been helping stop crimes, and I want to continue to help. What’s stopping me?”

“Okay, how about this?” He started sketching again. When he finished, he turned the pad around for her perusal.

She took it in hand and looked at it closely. He had drawn a suit similar to his covering her from shoulders to toes with a long cape. “It’s okay, but how about this?” She started modifying the sketch. When she finished, she handed it back to him.

He looked at it and caught his breath. “Are you sure? I mean I’d love it, but wouldn’t you feel uncomfortable?”

“The idea is to draw the eye away from the face, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know if I want my wife running around in public dressed like that.”

“I think it would help to hide my identity, maybe if we add a mask?”

“It’s not how much of your face that’s showing I’m having a problem with.”

Lois giggled at this response and winked at him as she replied, “I know, but isn’t that the object?” She giggled some more, “You think I’ll look that good huh?”

The drawing after Lois modified it looked like she would be wearing a blue Speedo swim suit with marching blue gloves that came up to her elbows, a pleated micro mini skirt in red and a red cape somewhat shorter than his reaching only to her waist and red boots that came to mid calf. A yellow belt would complete the outfit. The Star Sapphires would be stored in pockets in her belt, gloves and boots. Since her earrings were on posts and not danglers she would continue to wear the earrings, but they would have disguising covers over them to hide their true appearance. The same ‘S’ shield as on Clark’s uniform in a somewhat smaller size would grace her chest.

“I guess it’d be okay. I do think the idea of a mask is a good

one. I always felt uncomfortable, afraid that someone would recognize me. How about this?” He started drawing again. When finished he showed it to Lois. The mask would be like a ski mask that only came down as far as the nose with eye holes and made of the same stretchy material the suit was made out of. Both would wear the same style mask.

“I like it. Let’s get started on them. I think we can go to a sporting goods store for the basics. A speed skating suit for you and a bathing suit for me.”

“Okay, but what say we go to Colorado for the speed skating suit and Florida for the swim suit. I need a pair of Speedo trunks to complete mine anyhow.”

“Sounds like a plan. Let’s see two hours difference between here and Colorado, shops should still be open. How about California for the swim suits instead of Florida? They should still be open while Florida’s will be closed already.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

They went out into the back yard and hand in hand took off for the ski slopes and shops of Colorado.

They spent the weekend preparing their costumes. Once finished they modeled for each other.

Staring at Lois, Clark got a rueful look on his face. He could see that there was a potential problem but was having a problem addressing it. “I’m not so sure about this. When we are out together in these outfits, I’m going to embarrass myself just by looking at you.”

“What about me? My nipples are getting hard just looking at you.” They both laughed. “I guess they are effective at that.” Lois shrugged. “Maybe we need to look at the perps and not at each other?”

“Well, okay, we can try it that way,” Clark answered thoughtfully. “Now that we have the costumes, where do we begin? The problem now is, how do we announce ourselves?”

After a moment’s thought, Clark answered his own question with the suggestion. “I think that the first major disaster or crime we hear about, we’ll make our debut.”

Lois was a little nervous, and it was evident in her voice as she said, “You’ll have to help me. I don’t think I’ll be too nervous since we did those jobs on the robberies, but you never know.”

“You’ll do just fine. All we have to do now is to wait until the right event comes along.”

Almost as soon as Clark had finished speaking, there was an announcement of a multi-car pileup on the interstate. The announcement said that emergency crews were having a hard time getting to the scene because of the extent of road covered by the wrecks, and there were concerns for injuries. Since they hadn’t had time to remove their respective costumes, Clark looked over at Lois and said, “Looks like we have our chance. Ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be. Let’s go. Superman and Superwoman to the rescue!”

They stepped out their back door. Superman stretched out his hand to Superwoman. She clasped it in hers, and they took off straight up at superspeed and headed for the interstate.

As they approached the scene Clark thought, /Use your x-ray and telescopic vision to start checking the cars. I’ll take the buses and trucks. If I finish with them before you finish with the cars, I’ll start helping with them./ They both used their telescopic vision to assess the situation. The pileup covered a distance of several miles. The roadway had been slicked up by a leaking tanker truck. There were several buses in the mix along with many big rigs as well as a lot of cars. They hovered above the scene for a few seconds to evaluate the situation.

Superman thought to Superwoman, /The first priority is the injured. Use your X-ray vision to scan the cars, then take the most severely injured first. Don’t worry about damaging the

vehicles we need to extricate any injured. If there are any non-life threatening injuries, take them to the side where the paramedics are setting up immediately. If you feel your powers starting to wane, come join me to recharge./

She squeezed his hand and thought, /Got it. Let's go to work, partner./

They separated. Superwoman went to the front of the accident scene and started checking the occupants of the cars. The very first one she checked was the one with the most damage. Crushed front and rear. There was a woman with a child in a child safety seat. The woman was unconscious as was the child. She ripped the door off its hinges and released the child safety seat from its belts. She then released the woman from her belt. She reached in and cradled the woman in her arms. She picked up the child, safety seat and all, and placed it on the woman's abdomen holding it in place with one hand as she took off for the hospital. When she reached MetGen, she landed and carried the victims inside, placing the woman on a gurney with the child next to her. She called a nurse over. "These are the first of the victims of the accident on the interstate. We'll try to distribute them among the hospitals, but you need to be prepared for a lot of patients in a rather short time."

"Who are you?"

"A friend." Superwoman turned and took off.

As she took off, she could hear the awed exclamation, "Wow!" She looked back and waved and then increased her speed to get back to the accident scene.

It was only a couple of minutes later that Superman arrived at MetGen with the first of his victims. "This is the driver of one of the buses involved. I think he's had a heart attack!"

"Put him on this gurney. We'll take it from here. Who are you?"

"A friend."

"Okay, friend. Thanks for the help."

"I'll be back with more as will my partner." /How are you doing?/

/Coming in with another one./

"My partner's on her way in with another. She'll be her in a few seconds."

"Thanks for the heads up! Get ready people."

The staff at the hospital realizing that it was not going to take a long time to fill up the ER, called in additional staffing and allocated additional beds on the floors as overflow. It would have been less of a problem if they had had to wait for the paramedics to bring patients in since they would have come in in dribs and drabs, but this rapid delivery of sick and injured was going to strain their resources. The doctor in charge of the ER realized it was a two-edged sword. On one side their resources were going to be stressed, but on the other the rapid delivery would ensure prompt treatment. This way was preferable. The doctor had been monitoring the med channels and knew that the medics had not even been able to get to the scene, and here was his ER filling up with some seriously injured people that thanks to the prompt treatment would live to see another day. These two new superheroes were really doing a tremendous service.

This continued for several hours. Lois noticed no reduction of her powers after several hours of strenuous effort and was really feeling good about what she was doing. She was checking another car as she saw Superman lift off with yet another victim and smiled. She spoke to the occupant of the vehicle and determined that all she needed to do was remove the door so that the occupant could exit. She did that and moved to the next car. She had noticed that the number of seriously injured was diminishing and was grateful that things were slowing down. By this time the paramedics were on scene, some of the injured were being extricated by the fire service and turned over to them.

The fire service personnel, seeing what Superman and

Superwoman were doing, started calling them over when they had an extremely difficult extrication asking them to pull off doors or remove roofs since they were a lot faster than using the 'jaws of life'. In these instances generally the victim was one of those needing to be air lifted to a hospital.

After a while Superwoman was between rescues and saw Superman as he was returning from the hospital and flew up to join him. When she was in the air, she stopped and hovered until he joined her. "I'm seeing fewer and fewer people needing to be air lifted. How about you?"

"I'm seeing the same thing. How about this. There's the chief down there. Let's go introduce ourselves, and let him tell us what he needs."

"Good idea. Let's go." Clark reached out and she took his hand and they flew down and landed near the fire chief.

As they landed the chief turned to them and said, "I don't know where you people came from, but you sure have been a godsend. I don't know how many of the people you took to the hospitals would have made it if they had had to wait for us to arrive. Who are you anyway?"

Superman took the role of spokesman, "We are friends and are here to help. We arrived recently and decided that we couldn't sit on the sidelines and allow people to die if it could be prevented by our intervention."

"Well your intervention today sure saved a lot of people. For the fire service and for the city of Metropolis, thank you and welcome. Where do you come from?"

"We'll be holding a press conference in the near future to fill everyone in. I'd like to wait till then if you don't mind."

"After what you've done for us today, I don't care if I never find out. I'm just happy you're here now."

"What further assistance do you require from us today?"

"I think we can handle the rest of it from here. The rest are just glorified fender benders."

"In that case we'll be on our way. With as much of your resources as there are tied up here with this incident we may be needed in the city." Superman reached for Superwoman's hand. She placed hers in his, and they took off.

The fire chief watched as they flew away and shouted, "How do we get hold of if we need you?"

The duo stopped and hovered, and Superwoman replied, "Oh, we'll be around when we're needed. Bye!" They flew off and did a patrol of Metropolis. There were a number of robberies in process. Criminals seeing that a lot of police resources were being sent to the accident scene had thought that they had a good chance of not getting caught.

Clark thought, /Let's split up. There's a high speed chase and a bank robbery. Which one do you want?/

/I'll take the high speed chase./

/Be careful./

/I will./ She flew down next to the getaway car. The perp pulled out a gun and fired point blank at her. The bullet bounced off her invulnerable chest. She grabbed the gun out of his hand and crushed it. Then she reached in the window and turned the engine off. When the car slowed, she opened the door and dragged the perp out holding him a foot off the ground until the police drove up. One officer approached warily while the other covered the scene with his drawn gun.

"Here you go, officer. I don't think you'll have any further trouble with this one." She set him back on his feet but held him until the officer had the cuffs on him. She then handed the officer the crushed gun.

He said, "Thanks uh, Ms ... ?"

"Just a friend. See you around." She lifted off and took up station high over center city. From this vantage point she scanned the city. She spotted Clark as he was handling the bank robbery and watched using her X-ray and telescopic vision.

Superman had interrupted a bank robbery already in progress. He used his superspeed to disarm the robbers and then used the velvet cables used in the queue lines to tie them up. The bank guard came over after having retrieved his weapon. “Think you can keep them here till the police arrive?”

Lois thought to Clark, /I see the getaway car. I’ll get the driver./

/Okay, I’ll make sure that these stay put./

“I’m sure of it. Thanks, Mr. Uh ...”

“I’m just a friend. We’ll leave it at that for the time being. My partner will be here in a second with the driver of the getaway car.”

Lois walked in holding the driver by the shirt collar and added him to the catch.

“Okay, friend. I’ll keep ‘em here. Don’t you worry none.”

Superman and Superwoman took off and climbed into the air over center city and both looking around saw that everything was quiet, so they headed home.

Chapter 43 — The Press Conference

When they got in, their phone was ringing. Clark picked it up and with a cheery voice said, “Kent residence.”

“Clark, where have you been?”

Instantly recognizing Perry White’s gruff voice, Clark played innocent. “We went out for breakfast. It’s our day off.”

Perry was obviously excited as he asked, “Have you been listening to the radio?”

Clark was playing it deadpan as he answered, “No, why?”

Incredulity was dripping from his voice as Perry said, “It’s all over the news stations. There are two superheroes that just showed up.”

Clark keeping a skeptical tone asked, “What do you mean, superheroes?”

If Perry had been in the same room as Clark, at that minute he might have grabbed him by the throat and shaken him to get him to listen. He was almost shouting as he said, “They have spent the morning helping clear up a major pileup on the interstate, and just a short time ago one of them, a woman, stopped a high speed chase, and the other one, a man, foiled a bank robbery. I know it’s your day off, but I want you and Lois to get on this story right away.”

“Okay, Chief. We’ll get right on it.” Clark hung up the phone. He turned to Lois, and the two of them both broke out in laughter.

“Let me guess, he wants us to report on ourselves.”

“Right the first time! How do you do it?”

“I know Perry. Well, I guess we need to get changed. Except for the mask, gloves and boots, I could wear the costume under my clothes. I just had a thought. We still have some of the spandex material. Why don’t we make something that looks like boots out of it? That way all we need do is roll them up and put them in a pocket when they aren’t needed.”

“Good idea. Since we can float, we don’t have to be putting any pressure on them, so they shouldn’t wear out. It should only take a couple of minutes to do that, then we can go out and start interviewing people.” It only took a couple of minutes to cut and sew up the new ‘fake’ boots, and they were ready to go. The fire service was still busy at the accident scene, so they went first to the bank and interviewed the customers and the employees, especially the guard.

Lois asked the guard, “Can you describe this individual that you say stopped the robbery?”

“Yeah, I sure can. He was a little bigger than your partner here and better built. He had on a blue suit with red boots, trunks, and cape. The cape reached almost all the way to the floor. There was a mask that covered most of his head and face. Now the woman, wow, what a babe! She wore this skin tight outfit with a micro skirt. What a rack! And those gams, wow! She could be an

exotic dancer! I’d sure pay to see her act. Couldn’t tell anything about her face though; she wore a mask too.”

Lois was starting to feel a little uncomfortable. She was afraid that she was going to start blushing. Trying to avoid that, she concentrated on her questions. “Did the mask make you uneasy? Most law abiding people don’t wear a mask.”

“Nah, not for a minute. I used to read comic books as a kid. Plenty of them superheroes wore masks. They needed to protect their ‘secret’ identity. I got no problem with it. I could tell right off that he was one of the good guys. I hope they stick around a while. We could use more people like them around here really bad.”

“What else can you tell me about them? Did they give you their names?”

“No, they didn’t. They just said they were friends. I for one am glad they are. I’d sure hate to have them as enemies, I’ll tell you that. The way they rounded up those crooks, there ain’t no way I’d want them after me.”

“Thank you for your time. What is your name, and can I quote you?”

“Sure you can quote me all you like. The name’s Mike, Mike Powers.”

“Thank you for your time, Mike. The article will be in the Daily Planet.”

The next stop was the twelfth precinct and Bill Henderson’s office.

Clark asked the first question. “Bill, what can you give us on the bank collar and that high speed chase this afternoon?”

“I almost didn’t believe the report about the chase, but then another report came about a bank robbery being foiled. The officer reported that a high speed chase was in progress.

Suddenly a woman in a bathing suit with a cape flew down, disarmed the perp, and reached in and turned off the key on the perp’s car. When the car was stopped, she opened the door and dragged him out and held him up in the air until the uniform had the cuffs on him.” said Bill.

“Can we talk to the officer? We’d like to get a better description than a woman in a bathing suit,” Lois asked.

“Don’t forget about the cape,” Bill said.

With a sarcastic tone in her voice Lois said, “Oh yeah, a bathing suit **with** a cape.”

“Okay, the officer is Jeffers over in Broadway, precinct thirteen. Just ask for Detective Danny Clover, tell him I sent you over. He’ll set up the meet with Jeffers.”

“Thanks, Bill. We’ll head over there right away.”

Lois was glad that after they had moved back to Metropolis they had purchased a car. They had used it more before the White Orchid Ball, but it still came in handy now that they needed to cover up their abilities.

They drove over to the thirteenth precinct, and after meeting Danny Clover they interviewed Jeffers. He, of course, gave a thorough description of the woman that had stopped the chase.

“Yeah, she was some babe. Really stacked with beautiful legs. Blue Speedo type swimsuit with a micro mini skirt and a cape. She had this stylized ‘S’ symbol on her chest. I don’t know what it stands for. It must have some meaning though.”

“What about her face?”

“Face? I think it was covered.”

After they were back in the car, they both broke out in laughter. “Well, I guess we don’t have to worry about you being recognized. I don’t think he even glanced anywhere above your bustline.”

Sarcastically she said, “I feel a lot safer!”

Clark said, “Let’s get in to the office and write up what we have.” She started the jeep, and they headed for the Planet offices.

The next edition of the Daily Planet led with:

NEW SUPERHEROES IN TOWN CALL THEMSELVES FRIENDS

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

“Calling themselves friends, two superheroes suddenly appeared yesterday. They stopped a high speed car chase, broke up a bank robbery, and helped with the multi car pileup ...”

At home Lois and Clark discussed how to present themselves to the community.

“I don’t think that we can give the Planet an exclusive. That would only put a spotlight on the paper,” Clark proposed.

Nodding her head in agreement Lois said, “Your right. We can’t afford to have too great an association with the Planet. How should we go about it?”

“I think we need to contact the mayor’s office and ask for a press conference.”

“What if Perry assigns us to cover it?” Lois asked.

“We may have to take turns. One of us in the audience while the other speaks,” Clark suggested.

“How about this? You go as the spokesperson, and I’ll be in the audience. Clark can be home sick. After I ask a few questions, I can duck out and join you at the mic.”

“That sounds good. How do you think we should handle it?”

“We can work on the questions I’ll ask, and then you can field any others that are asked.”

“I think that we need to let everyone know that we are married. Otherwise we may have a situation where men are throwing themselves at you and women at me.”

“I agree wholeheartedly on that one. I don’t want strange women throwing themselves at my husband!”

“And I don’t want men making passes at my wife.” They both had a laugh over these possibilities.

Clark used his prepaid cell phone to call the mayor’s office. After identifying himself as the person that helped at the crash site and broke up the bank robbery, he was put through. “Mr. Mayor I would like to thank you for taking my call.”

“Don’t mention it. What can I do for you?”

“Mr. Mayor, I would appreciate it if you would arrange with the various media outlets to hold a press conference. I would like to give an explanation for our presence and introduce us. Could you do that for me?”

“I’d be more than happy to. When?”

“How about noon tomorrow?”

“I’ll set it up. How about in front of City Hall?”

“That would be fine, Your Honor. Tomorrow at noon in front of City Hall. Thank you.”

The next day a platform with a podium had been set up in front of City Hall, and the members of the press corps were in a bunch in front of it. Several noted dignitaries were on the platform some scanning the skies looking for their new Superheroes.

As the clock in the tower began to strike 12, one of the officials shouted, “I think I see one of them! It’s the guy, but he looks to be by himself.”

Just as the clock finished striking its twelfth note, he landed on the platform. The mayor stepped forward and stuck out his hand. Superman took it and shook it. The mayor beckoned him to the podium. The mayor started speaking. “Ladies and gentlemen of the press, it is my pleasure to have arranged this press conference. I would like to introduce our guest.” In an aside to Superman he asked, “What do I call you?”

“Superman.”

Turning back to the mics he said, “I would like to introduce our guest, Superman! He is going to give us some background information. Superman, if you please.”

“Thank you, Mr. Mayor. Ladies and gentlemen of the press.

My companion has been delayed by another commitment, however, I do expect her to be here shortly. I would like to make a brief statement, and then I’ll open the floor to questions.”

“We have been here among you for a brief period attempting to assist your constabulary in secret. If you recall some weeks ago, there were reports in your newspapers about the ‘Karate Kids’, I must confess that those individuals were myself and Superwoman in disguise. We were not ready at that time to reveal our presence, so we adopted that means of being able to assist. It recently became necessary to act out in the open. In the recent multi-vehicle accident on the interstate, many lives were at stake, and we wanted to prevent as many fatalities as we could. We determined that the best way to do this was by assisting the fire service and your police in their efforts in that incident. We have come here as friends and only desire to help in any way we can to assist in preserving life and preventing crime. At this time I’ll open it up to questions from the press.”

Since Clark had been sick, Perry had teamed Lois with Ralph Pinedo, so they were both in the press area. Spotting Lois with her hand up he pointed to her and said, “The young lady in the front row.”

“Superman, where exactly did you come from?”

“I am a space traveler. I was born on a planet called Krypton in a far distant system. Krypton was a very massive world under a red sun. In the lower gravity of Earth, we have tremendous strength and agility. I would like to keep the full range of our abilities a secret from all except those with a need to know. My home planet Krypton was destroyed by a core instability which caused it to blow up. The survivors relocated to a planet now called New Krypton.”

“A follow-up if you will. How long will you be staying?”

“We have now made the Earth our home. We’ll be staying as long as we are needed. As long as we can help, we will.”

“Thank you.”

“Next question, please.”

Superman selected Ralph Pinedo. “Who is that babe that you were with? Is she your sister or something? Is she available?”

Lois had quietly been moving away from the crowd trying to make her exit as she heard this set of questions. She started to do a slow boil. If she had been up on the platform, she might have been tempted to fry him with her heat vision.

“When she arrives, I’ll allow her to explain our relationship. I think it’s best if you hear it from her. Next question, please.”

Superman pointed to Linda King from LNN.

“You alluded to additional powers. We have all seen you fly. We know from the reports that you can rip doors and roofs off of vehicles with your bare hands. When you do these things, aren’t you taking a chance on injury?”

“I think I can answer that without revealing too much. Our skin is a lot tougher than that of an Earth Human. A Kryptonian Human under Earth’s yellow sun has virtually impenetrable skin.”

Lois had managed to extricate herself from the crowd and found a secluded area to spin into her uniform. She took off faster than the eye could follow until she was at altitude. She sent Clark a message, /I’m at altitude. Coming in./

Without looking up Superman said, “Superwoman is approaching. She should be here in about ten seconds.”

Exactly on time Superwoman landed at Superman’s side. There was a not so hushed exclamation from the crowd at her appearance, mostly from the males in the crowd.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about! Hey, babe, are you available?” This was from Ralph.

Superwoman turned to Superman and putting her hand behind his head pulled him down for a very deep soulful kiss. She then turned and looked straight at Ralph and said, “I’m too much woman for you! You couldn’t handle me, and if you tried to

my husband, Superman, might just break you in two.”

Ralph metaphorically placed his tail between his legs and tried to exit before the jeers that he was getting from his colleagues got too bad.

Superwoman continued, “Yes, Superman and I are husband and wife not only by the laws of Krypton but also of Earth.”

“As to involvement in day to day rescue and crime fighting activities, my husband will be the one primarily responsible for assisting the first responders and police. It will only be when he is unavailable or in circumstances such as we had the other day where more than one pair of hands were needed that I’ll become involved. I want to stress again, we are friends to the people of the Earth, and we are here to help in any way that we can.”

Superman said, “We have time for two more questions. The gentleman in the blue suit.”

“Why the masks?”

“The masks are to preserve our anonymity. We are humans just as you are, and we are living among you as humans. We, as you, cherish our privacy. We have a life and hope to have children here. If we lost our privacy, what kind of life would we have? We have been here long enough to have formed some friendships. If not for our privacy, anyone known to associate with us would be subject to kidnap as an attempt to control us. To give a theoretical example, if it were known that we were friends with His Honor the mayor, His Honor could be subject to kidnap and by that we could be subject to blackmail to do things which we would not normally do. I guess you could say that the masks protect our private identities and anyone that we know in our private lives. We have studied some of your old radio and television programs. I think of ‘The Lone Ranger’ when I think about the mask. He wore the mask to protect his identity from the criminals he fought because he still had relatives who could be vulnerable if his identity were to be known. He also wore it as a symbol of justice. He had two things that were his symbols the mask and his silver bullets. We hope that our masks will serve the same purpose. They are to be symbols for justice and safety.”

“Last question.” Superwoman pointed to a reporter from the Star.

“What does the symbol on your chest stand for?”

“It actually has a dual meaning. It is a symbol in my native language for the name of my house, the house of El. My wife wears the same symbol because by marriage she is now also of the house of El. The other meaning is derived from its similarity to your English letter ‘S’. It stands for Superman and Superwoman, the names we go by when we help.”

“That is all the time we have for questions. My wife and I wish to thank you for your time. We have other commitments that we need to attend to.” He took Superwoman’s hand in his, and with a wave of his free hand they took to the skies.

They flew straight up until they were out of sight and then headed for 348 Hyperion Ave. They landed quickly and went inside. They spun out of the uniforms and into their civilian attire.

“I think that Clark is going to feel better. The headache he was suffering from has lifted and he can accompany his wife back to work for the afternoon. What do you think?”

“I think I would love to have my husband with me. I’m glad the headache lifted.”

“Wonderful stuff that aspirin.”

They both started laughing. Lois said, “I guess we need to get in and write up this story. We don’t want the Star to scoop us after all.”

Chapter 44 — Another Revelation Or Is It?

February 28, 1993

Later that night the telephone at 348 Hyperion Ave. rang. The caller ID showed Ross, P. /It’s Lana or Pete. Lana knows my secret. After the press conference today, I bet she knows yours.

Shall we fill Pete in on the secret? I believe that we can trust him./

‘Kent residence.’

Lois thought back, /Your call./

“Clark, Lana! Since when is Lois able to do you know what?”

“Hi Lana. Are you and Pete free this evening? We’d like you guys to come over for dinner.”

“Okay, what time?”

“Seven thirty sound good to you?”

“We’ll be there.” The line went dead.

“Now that you have powers, we don’t need to worry so much, but it isn’t fair to Lana to have her know and not Pete. I’ve known him all my life, and I trust him. Actually I’ve meant to tell him for a long time now. Besides sooner or later we might be in the market for babysitters and who better than Pete and Lana?”

“I trust your judgment, and besides they are our closest friends. At first I wasn’t so sure how things would work out with Lana, but next to you she’s become my best friend. She’s my best ***girlfriend***.”

That evening

Clark had made a Shrimp Stir Fry for dinner. Lois had called for egg rolls and fortune cookies. As they were finishing up Clark started the conversation. “Pete, we’ve known each other a long time. I think it’s about time I told you some things about me ... “

Pete interrupted. He had a very concerned look on his face as he said, “Clark, could I see you for a second in the kitchen?”

With a somewhat mystified air Clark replied, “Sure, if you need to.”

They got up and moved to the kitchen. Lois and Lana both had questioning expressions on their faces at this turn of events. Lois said, “Well, while they’re out of the room, I guess we could start talking about the wedding.”

“I want to talk about you having Clark’s powers. How’d it happen? Can it happen to just anyone?”

“We don’t know, but we don’t think so. We think it has something to do with a laser beam Clark was hit with. It somehow changed me and did something else to my jewelry.”

“Do you have ***all*** of his powers?”

“From all that we’ve been able to determine, yes, I’ve got them all.”

“I don’t know if I should congratulate you or say I’m sorry for you. How do you feel about it?”

“We’re happy. Now I won’t have to worry about being made a pawn to force Superman to do something he doesn’t want to do. We can do ***everything*** together, not just the ‘normal’ stuff. Lana, you have no conception what it feels like to fly under your own power, no wings, no engines, just you and the sky. It’s wonderful. I wish you could experience it. Maybe I could take you up for a flight sometime. I think you’d like it.”

Meanwhile, in the kitchen.

“Okay, Pete, why did we need to come out here?”

“How much does Lana know about you?”

“Huh?”

“How much does Lana know about what you can do? Are you sure you want to talk about it in front of her?”

“What do you mean? How much do you know?”

“Clark, we’ve been best friends for how many years? A lot of years. Do you think that it’s possible to hide something like that from someone so close for all that time? Buddy, I’ve known about you for years. I’m glad that you finally found a way to do it out in the open.”

“Let’s go back in the dining room. The girls need to hear

about this.”

When they had returned to their seats Clark said, “Lois, it appears as though we have been scooped! Pete has known my secret for a while now.”

There was a gasp from Lana, “I didn’t say a thing!”

Laughing Clark replied, “I know that Lana. Pete tells me that he’s known for years about me and has kept my secret; apparently even from you since neither of you knew that the other knew. When did you find out Pete?”

“Remember that camping trip we took up to Reeves’

Overlook? That night in the tent I woke up in the middle of the night, and I saw you floating three feet above your sleeping bag. Your nose was practically brushing the tent ceiling. After that I started watching for unusual things. Remember when Billy was trapped under that tree and you lifted it enough to get him out? None of us thought much of it at the time. We thought that the tree was rotten or something, but I went back and tried to lift it. I couldn’t budge it an inch. When we were on that hiking trip and we got caught in the rain. You managed to start a fire using wood that was so wet, it was like it had been pulled out of a stream. There were other things. I realized that you were something special, I didn’t know just how special you were, but you were my best friend, and there was no way I would reveal your secret. I’ve kept it to myself all these years. Like I said out in the kitchen, I’m glad you have finally found a way to work out in the open. I guess that somehow Lois now has your powers too. I couldn’t see you acting the way you did at that press conference with anyone but Lois. How’d it happen?”

“Pete, I need to say that you’re the best friend I’ve ever had, except for Lois. You discovered my secret on your own and kept it and me safe all these years. Lana has known for some time. I told her about myself when we were getting serious. She has kept my secret all these years also. Thank you, both of you.”

“About Lois’ powers, that’s something we want to look into, and you’re just the guy to do that for us.” Clark got up and went to a side table from which he retrieved a small packet. “Here is some of the residue from the Star Sapphires I gave Lois for our wedding. Those are the source of her powers. We need to have these pieces analyzed. Since you’re the head of the Geology and Metallurgy lab at STAR Labs, I figured you would have the facilities to do just that. The jeweler that cut and polished the gems said that they were a never before seen variety. You’ve seen them; in fact Lois has the earrings and ring on now. See, they have a double star. We need to know what this stone is and where it came from.”

“I’ll get on it right away.”

“There’s another thing.” Clark got up and went to the secret compartment. He picked up the laser and opened the case. “Here is what caused Lois to acquire my powers. This is actually a laser not a video cam. Watch this.” Clark went over and doused the lights. When he did the red crystal in the laser chamber began to glow. At the same time Lois’ earrings and ring began to glow brighter and brighter. “Wow, we hadn’t noticed that before! Lois, look at your ring!”

“Wow, I can feel my strength increasing! I don’t have the full set on, and I don’t usually feel this strong with just these pieces. What’s happening?”

“It’s like the Sapphires are reacting to the red crystal!”

“We’re going to need to test this out. If your smaller gems can be supercharged by the red crystal, you may not have to carry around the whole set all the time. You might be able to get away with just a few and the red crystal. Pete, we need this checked out. Can you do it for us?”

“You can count on me. I’ll start tomorrow. Can I have one of the smaller ‘energized’ jewels as well as the residue and the red crystal?”

“Sure, her you go.” Lois handed him one of the smaller gems

from a concealed pocket.

“Here’s what happened, we were at the White Orchid Ball ...” Clark went on to tell the entire story.

“Wow, that’s some story. From what you’re saying, it looks like you could be right. It looks like the gems are acting like a storage battery for your powers and imparting them to Lois. I’d like to try something. Could you put the jewelry on Lana and see if she gets powers?”

Lois said, “Sure! Lana, let’s get you decked out. Come on up to our room.”

Lana and Lois disappeared upstairs.

“You know Pete, if this works there may be no keeping her down. She may want a set for herself!”

“You think?”

They both started laughing.

A few minutes later the girls came downstairs.

“Okay Lana, let’s see what you can do. Let’s try something simple. Try picking up that living room chair.”

Lana moved over behind the indicated chair and bending down tried to lift it without any success.

“How about this. The first power Lois had was superhearing. See if you can hear my heartbeat.”

Lana got a look of extreme concentration on her face and held it for several minutes. Finally she relaxed and said, “Nope, nothing.”

Lois said, “Here let me touch the gems.” She did and immediately she had her full powers back. “I hear your heartbeat as well as everyone else’s. I guess that means that I’m the only one the jewels will work with.”

Lana said, “It’s just as well. I don’t think I would want the responsibility that goes along with having those powers anyhow. Clark, I was a fool. All that time I tried to make you deny your powers, I was trying to deny what you were. Now that you have come out into the open with it, and I can see how much good you’re doing and can do in the future, I want to just kick myself. What I was doing was almost criminal. I’m glad you found Lois, and I’m glad you opened my eyes, not just to that but to Pete as well. Thanks.”

While she had been speaking, Lana had been divesting herself of the jewels and giving them back to Lois.

“Lana, I’m just happy that things have worked out.”

Lois said, “Lana, you want to go for that ride I promised you? ‘I’d love to.’”

Lois spun into her uniform which elicited a ‘Wow’ from both Lana and Pete. She held out her hand to Lana and grasping it led her to the back door.

When they returned, Lana was flushed with excitement. “I’ve never in my life imagined it could be like that. Clark, all those times you offered to take me flying, and I turned you down! What was I thinking? It was wonderful.”

Lois said, “Lana, there will be times that we go out to Smallville. Maybe you and Pete would like to come with us occasionally.”

“Could we? That would be wonderful!”

“You guys could stay in the guestroom at the farm.”

Pete answered for the both of them, “We’d love to, guys, thanks.”

Lois spun back into her casual clothes and grabbed Lana and led her back into the dining room. She and Clark cleared the table at superspeed so that the girls could have it for paperwork while they planned the wedding. Pete and Clark went into the living room to catch what was left of the Metropolis Metros / Philadelphia Phillies game.

Chapter 45 — Herb Shows Up

Earlier that same day

February 28, 1993

Clark and Lois had flown to the Congo and were waiting for Herb. Clark was sure that he was at the agreed upon spot; he just had to wait patiently.

With a little bit of frustration in his voice he said to Lois, “Herb said he would be here between 12:00, noon and 3:00 PM local time.”

Lois said, “Maybe he’s been delayed.”

“Lois, he’s a time traveler. There’s no such thing as being delayed.”

“Then maybe he’s not coming.”

“He seemed so sure. Something must have happened.”

Suddenly what looked like a doorway opened in front of them, and Herb stepped through. The doorway automatically closed behind him.

When Clark got a good look at Herb, he noticed that he was somewhat older than he had been when he had dropped him off. The Herb that had dropped him off had in fact been the 1912 incarnation whereas this was the 1917 version. “Herb, I was getting worried that you wouldn’t be here.”

“Sorry, my boy. It’s a long story. Ah, I see that Lois is with you! You look lovely, my dear. You look absolutely radiant.”

“Lois, please allow me to introduce Herbert George Wells. Herb, Lois Lane-Kent. *My* Lois and my wife.”

Lois stuck out her hand. Herb took it in both hands and shook it. Lois said, “I take it that I have you to thank for bringing Clark back in time so that he could save me.”

Very humbly Herb replied, “Yes, my dear. I was in some small way able to assist Clark in his quest. He had tried and tried to find you to no avail. I was able to facilitate his efforts in a way that was not possible for him.”

“Then in a very real sense I owe my life to you.” Lois threw her arms around his neck and gave Herb a big kiss on the cheek.

Herb was more than a little flustered by all this attention and blushed. He cleared his throat and stammered, “I, uh, I can ... cannot tell you how hap ... happy I am to have been able to assist in this matter. As I explained to Clark when I first proposed to help him, my main goal in this life is now to see to it that as many universes within the greater multiverse move to utopia as possible. If my small efforts have facilitated this, then I am amply repaid.”

“Now that we are together ...” Lois looked over at Clark the love obvious in her eyes. “There is nothing that’s going to separate us.”

“Jolly good show! Then the mission was successful! Actually I knew it had been. That’s what delayed me so to speak. You see, you weren’t supposed to be here, and it took a while to find you. We are starting to understand the creation of alternate universes more all the time.”

“Let me explain it to you this way when a critical event occurs a new universe is created. You actually passed a critical point and created a new universe. It took a while to realize that that was what had happened. Well, are you ready to move to 1997?”

“No Herb, we can’t do that. We’re established in the here and now. To move ahead would create a discontinuity.”

“Ah, I see, you have actually deduced the facts and correctly I might add. You have found out that you’re the only Clark Kent here.”

“Yes Herb, we discovered that some time ago. We also found that that wasn’t the only change that occurred. We are very happy with the way things have turned out. We’ve now built a life for ourselves together. Lois has acquired a copy of my powers and has joined me in fighting crime as well as in life. She’s going to be taking some time off here pretty soon though.”

With a very broad smile Lois announced, “I’m pregnant. We’re going to be parents in about seven months.”

“Well, congratulations to the both of you. I’m happy for

you.”

“Herb, we realized early on that we had changed history and decided to make the best of it. We’ve been married for close to a year now.” Clark nodded to Lois, and they both started to spin. They both became a blur of bright primary colors, and when they stopped, Superman and Superwoman stood in their places.

“I see that you have adopted a somewhat different uniform. Very becoming and yours, Lois, is spectacular. I can see why you will be taking some time off. Your condition would be very obvious in that uniform. How are you going to explain her absence?”

“When we announced our presence, we said we were visitors from New Krypton. My wife has to go back to visit some ailing relatives. She’ll return some time after the baby is delivered. Not too soon after, we don’t want to give too much away.”

“That should do splendidly. Now that I know where you are, do you mind if I drop in occasionally?”

“That would be fine, Herb. I do have some questions though. How are the other Lois and Clark? Are they still having trouble conceiving?”

“Well, let’s see, right now it’s also 1993 in their universe, and they haven’t even met as yet. I actually don’t think that I’d be giving too much away at this point if I were to tell you that they will be having their first child in 2000. The first of many I might add.”

“How many?”

“I might be giving too much away if I were to answer that particular question. Let’s leave it at this; they will have a long and happy life together as will you. I’ve been to your future and because of your union your universe will achieve utopia in the future. Congratulations, my boy and to you my dear. May you live a long and happy life, and may your married life be all that you hoped it could be.”

“Are we going to have to deal with Tempus?” Clark asked.

“No, you will not. You will have some major problems to deal with as you have already dealt with Lex Luthor, but it will not be anything that you cannot handle on your own. If you see me again, it will most likely be a social visit, just checking in as it were, or I may be here to recruit your assistance with a problem elsewhere.”

“That will be fine, Herb. We’ll look forward to seeing you in the future. Actually I’m going to request that you give us a visit in a year. Oh by the way, we live at 348 Hyperion. I liked their house so much, we bought it here. The reason for the visit is Lois’ powers. We have been doing some research on them, how Lois acquired them, how they are renewed, and especially if they can be passed on. We are near a resolution of all of our questions. The answers look very promising. At this point I am making the assumption that all of our answers will be what I expect them to be. We’ve discussed it, and we would like to enable the other Lois to have the same powers her Clark has. Lois having my powers has, if it were really possible, made us even closer. Now we can share literally everything. We’d like to give that gift to the other Lois.”

“My boy, that is an extremely wonderful gift that you wish to bestow. I will be sure to return in one year, and I will do whatever I can to facilitate the process.” Turning to Lois Herb said, “My dear, it has been a pleasure meeting you.” Herb reached for Clark’s hand. “My boy, again, my congratulations and may you enjoy a long married life with Lois.”

Herb pulled out a device from his pocket and entered some coordinates. When he depressed a particular switch, a portal opened in the air in front of him. With a final wave to the couple, he stepped through, and the portal closed behind him.

Epilogue
TTEMPO Headquarters

2042

Herb stepped through the portal into the receiving area of the lobby of TTEMPO HQ. He looked around and saw the motto that he had insisted be posted over the reception desk. It was emblazoned in gold letters, “Only Time Will Tell”. As he was stepping away from the receiving pad, he observed Andrus as he was stepping onto an outgoing pad. He thought, <Uh oh, I hope he does better on this assignment than he did the last time. Oh well, only time will tell.>

Herb took a tube to his floor, and as he approached it, his office the door automatically opened for him since it was keyed to his bioelectromagnetic signature. When he entered, he hung his bowler hat on the coat rack standing just inside the door. He said, “Lights!” and several lamps designed to look like the gas lamps of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century lit up. He walked over to an old fashioned roll top desk and sat down. As he did so, the chair actually creaked as it took his weight. He pushed a button on his desk and speaking into the air said, “New document.”

A very human sounding voice replied, “Working. Will this be a letter or a journal entry?”

“Journal entry, new book. Title ... Universal Locator Designation — Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 040”

“Sub-head: Universe created by survival of Lois Lane from Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036.”

“Observations:”

“Clark Kent of Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036 was able to save the Lois of his universe, in doing so Tau 040 was created.”

“Last contact with Clark and Lois of Tau 040 was at Livingstone Falls, Congo, February 28, 1993 sidereal.”

“Clark and Lois know of the change and only think that it’s a change of history. They do not know that they are actually in a newly created universe resulting from Lois’ survival. They are now married and expecting their first child.”

“Lois now possesses a copy of Clark’s powers.”

“Tickle file reminder — at some point I need to go to Tau 040 on February 28, 1994 at 348 Hyperion Avenue to facilitate the transfer of some of the Star Sapphires and a piece of the red Kryptonite to Lorelei Kent in Alpha 023 x Gamma 004 x Tau -124. Such delivery is to be made in 2084 sidereal. That will ensure that she has the superpowers, and it will extend her life so that Clark will not have to lose a second partner and grieve unnecessarily. Another segment is to be delivered to Lois in Prime (Tau -120) in the year 2010 with the stipulation that she pretend that it is her daughter who is performing as Ultra Woman when my 1912 persona shows up in 2031.”

Herb picked up a piece of jewelry from his desk. “Pause entry.”

“Pausing.”

After several minutes contemplation he said, “Resume. Side note.”

“Please continue.”

In a rather musing tone Herb began talking again. “For the record, this mission had a very serendipitous outcome. I hadn’t known until now that this was the source of the Star Sapphire Kryptonite. I’ve known about it for some time as it has been in general use with the Earth-human spouses for hundreds of years, but to see how it all came about, it’s thrilling. In my hand is a pendant which had been worn by one of the Earth-human spouses.”

“Imbedded within this pendant is a piece of the Star Sapphire blue Kryptonite and a chip of the red Kryptonite which supercharges it. Through a series of tests Clark of Tau 040 with the help of his best friend Pete Ross at S. T. A. R. labs determined just how much by carat weight of the Star Sapphire Kryptonite

needed to be worn by the Earth-human spouse to acquire superpowers when the sapphire K was exposed to the red K. Each pendant exceeds those minimums with a safety margin.”

“The Superman foundation had the pendants manufactured by a shop in the Congo. That shop is the shop that created the original jewelry set for the Lois of Tau 040. The real pendants are made of Sterling Silver. Pete found that gold, which had a molecular weight and density very close to that of lead, would block enough of the radiation as to make it ineffective. The Superman Foundation also commissioned cheap, plated, replicas to be made for general sale. Millions of the replicas had been sold so no one thinks twice about anyone seen wearing one, and only the members of the family know that the additional supermen and superwomen are in fact the Earth-human spouses being given powers through the gems.”

“There was no hazard associated with any of the ‘real’ pendants falling into the wrong hands since the powers are only given to those individuals that through close association with the Kryptonian—human members of the Kent clan who have been genetically modified by the exposure to the Kryptonian aura and now have a hybrid, purple, aura. They are still numbered for identification purposes and a GPS beacon installed so that they can be traced if lost or stolen.”

“Return to tickle file reminder.”

“Please proceed.”

“The timing is critical. My 1912 self visited them in early 2031 and my 1912 self visited in 2000. Too much information too soon is not a good thing. Reminder to be given to my 1917 or later self. They need to keep my earlier personas in the dark about this until my 1917 or later self actually deliver the gems myself. End reminder.”

“Reminder noted. What trigger?”

“The trigger will be when my 1917 or later self has been in the office for a period of no less than three days without a mission. End trigger. Continue journal entry.”

“Please proceed.”

“A brief excursion into the future in Tau 040 revealed that as a result of having Clark’s powers Lois Lane will now age at the same rate as the Clark of that universe. Hers is the first documented case of life extension through the use of the Star Sapphire Kryptonite which now is generally in use thanks to their discovery. I did not follow through to the end of her life, however I did move forward to the year 2230 sidereal, and she and Clark were both still actively performing super deeds.”

“Side note: The result of Lois having Clark’s powers has been very similar to the result of Prime Lois’ body becoming sensitized to a Kryptonian aura. By the time I visited in 2131, they had had a number of children. A check at a later time revealed that all in all they will have a total of fifty three children. The greater number of children is attributable to the fact that their first child was to be delivered in 1993 sidereal whereas Lois in Prime didn’t have her first child until year 2000 sidereal.”

“Side note 2: The problem of Clark Kent of Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036 still exists. That will need to be the next project. This situation will require significant intervention and may require some novel steps be taken in order to prevent the creation of yet another new universe. There will be some prep work required prior to this intervention.”

“End entry”

<I’ll need to discuss options with some of the department heads before I act. This is going to be a unique problem which will require an equally unique solution. Time for that later. I think I’ll take a nap.> He got up out of the chair and moved to a side wall. A door opened automatically. He stepped through and said, “Office lights off.” The office lights went out. “Bedroom lights on half power.” Dim light flooded the space. Herb took off his jacket and hung it over a butler and kicking his shoes off

stretched out on a day bed. <We know that all Clarks are attracted to Lois to some extent or other. Mostly to a significant degree. I should be able to capitalize on that fact to provide the resolution to this problem.> He spoke out loud, “Note!”

“Working. Letter or Journal entry?”

“Addenda to previous entry.”

“Working.”

“Use Clark’s attraction to Lois as a lever to resolve the problem. End entry.”

“Recorded.”

THE END

To be continued in Clark and Lois — Despair to Hope — Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 4

A/N:

Sidereal (pronounced sai’diera.el) time is a universal constant based upon the movement of the planets and stars. Primarily used by astronomers. In my L&C universe (this and other stories to come) it will be used. Because in other stories I will be having events occur ‘out of sequence’ with the L&C universe of the series, but the ST or UT will provide the touchstone.

The multiverses are separated from each other primarily by their vibratory state expressed as 3 vectors. Imaging a cube having 3 dimensions — length, width, and height. The vectors used to express the vibratory rate and direction represents the directions of the vibrations. Imagine 3 vectors each perpendicular to the other 2. The closer the 3 vectors are to each other in total indicates the relationship of one universe to another. For instance universe: Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 040 would be more closely related to and in fact an offshoot of Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036 (Alt 1) than Alpha 023 x Gamma 004 x Tau -120 (Prime) as can be seen by the similarities in the Gamma and Tau values.

The creation of universes within the multiverse occurs when an inflection point is reached. There are certain ‘key’ individuals who when their circumstances have 2 possible outcomes causes a disturbance in the space/time continuum which results in 2 or more universes being added to the multiverse. The number of possible outcomes determines the actual number of universes created each having it own unique vibratory signature. In all cases the variation in the vibratory change will be just sufficient for a complete differentiation to occur. In the event of multiple ‘new’ universes being created simultaneously, they will automatically assume vibratory rates sufficiently diverse so that no overlap occurs. To date there have been few ‘key’ individuals identified which will bring about this development. The establishment of Utopia and those circumstances which cause it to be delayed seem to be the critical factor which causes this to be the case. In this particular instance the first split recorded in this story occurs when Lois becomes pregnant without developing the sensitivity to Clark’s aura which slows her aging process and manifested itself when the aura of her first child made itself apparent. The fundamental rule which seems to apply to the multiverses is that the shortest path to the objective is that straight line path that is followed. The straight line path being Lois’s increased longevity and birthing a rather significant number of half Kryptonian children thus hastening the foundation of Utopia. This being the straight line path, any inflection point will result in a universe wherein the foundation of Utopia will be delayed.

Footnotes

1. [Si tu veux de moi \(tr: If You Want Me\)](#)
2. [Oui Saura \(tr: Who Will Know\)](#)
3. [Singapore Sling](#)
4. [Lady marmalade](#)
5. [Ou Es Tu \(Or are You\)](#)

6. [Dance Me to the End of Love](#)

[Dance Me to the End of Love live](#)

7. A loose quote from Spock in “City on the Edge of Forever” Star Trek TOS.