

Gender Bender

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Rated: PG

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Summary: In a world where the sexes are reversed, will Louis survive the Congo? Will Clara ever be inspired to become Superwoman?

Scrambling through the mud for the fifth time, Louis Lane scowled up at the immaculate woman in the covered jeep. Safely protected from the rain, she looked crisp and clean and unhealthily smug. Somehow it was always like this. No matter what he did, she was always just a step ahead. She made everything look easy while he had to struggle for every extra lead.

Clara Kent was a pain in his ass, and somehow she always made a point of showing him up.

“So are you getting in, or are you just going to walk like that in the rain?” Clara’s lips quirked, and Louis scowled.

Suddenly he scrambled up the incline and made his way to the door of the jeep. He may have been stubborn, but he wasn’t stupid. It was six miles to the nearest settlement, and there were rebel soldiers looking for hostages.

The life of a war correspondent was a lonely one at times, and Louis’s fingers itched for a cigarette.

Clara caught his abortive motion and said “You can smoke that...if you want to walk.”

Irritated, Louis slammed the door shut and stared straight ahead. “Don’t say a word.”

Clara grinned at him, and Louis slumped down in his seat, knowing that he was smearing mud all over her van. It served her right. Nobody had the right to be that perfect.

The woman wasn’t human.

“I’m not working with her, Chief.” It was all he could do to keep his voice even. “She’s a rookie. I’ll spend half my time having to keep her alive.”

The other half would be spend trying to keep her from taking his Kerth. It wouldn’t leave much time for sleep, the actual investigation, or anything else. Besides, the woman creeped him out.

He winced as he listened to the voice on the other end of the line.

“She’s gonna keep ME alive?”

So she’d been a bodyguard in Nigeria...rescued a local Prince’s family a few times. Things in the Congo were different.

“I don’t need a babysitter...”

He scowled again, then slammed the phone into its cradle. His hands itched for a cigarette.

“I’m the top banana,” Louis said. “You do what I say, and we’ll get along fine.”

Clara didn’t say a word. Her lips twitched slightly in an imperturbable smile- the exact sort of expression that had infuriated him about her since the first time they’d met. She watched him, and there was something about that fact that made him vaguely uneasy. It seemed as though she was always watching him, and Louis didn’t know what it meant.

Maybe it was the bodyguard training. Maybe she was attracted to him.

Louis hated not knowing what things meant. Even worse, he

hated feeling out of control. Clara Kent left him feeling both confused and breathless.

The hard shove from his left was almost as unexpected as the bullet that slammed into the wall where his head had been. He felt the warmth of her body sprawled out on his for the briefest of moments, and then it was gone.

He must have blacked out for a moment, because when he looked up, she was already across the road struggling with the gunman.

Truthfully, the gunman was struggling with her.

He stared as she tore the gun out of his hands and knocked him out.

It didn’t look like any form of martial arts that he’d ever seen, but it seemed brutally effective. It wasn’t at all what he would have expected from a woman her size.

As the gunman slid down the wall, Louis realized that she hadn’t even scuffed her khaki outfit.

He was going to win a Pulitzer. Thousands of rifles, machine guns, grenades — enough to supply an army of rebels in three different countries, and this was all at one supply depot. The weapons weren’t the hodgepodge of military surplus one usually found in places like this; instead the weapons were crisp and new. Shipped out of Metropolis, sent here, to the border with Rwanda, the trail was clear.

For the first time, Clara seemed to have lost her calm. The sounds of a radio playing nearby, left by the guards that Clara had managed to stun, played tinny music several decades out of date in the US.

The music was interrupted by another political diatribe. Louis had heard enough translations to know what it was — hate speech directed at the Tutsi tribe. The transcriptions Louis had seen were pretty brutal — describing the tribe members as subhuman.

Clara grabbed his arm as the radio went silent. There were sounds of shouts in the background, and she pulled him up the stairs, her grip surprisingly strong.

They were crouched on a catwalk overlooking the warehouse when the double doors leading into the warehouse began to slide open.

Louis crouched desperately, hoping that the shadows would conceal them. The warehouse below was poorly lit and there weren’t many places to hide.

The men stepping into the warehouse didn’t bother to look up. They simply backed a truck into the warehouse and began loading the boxes into it.

Louis heard a small clicking sound from behind him. Clara was snapping pictures as quickly as she could. Louis found the words to the story already forming in his head. They’d have proof of the connection, and he’d have his prize.

Clara stiffened again, her head tilted as the men below muttered to themselves. She paled slightly, and her expression turned grim. Louis could see her fingers tightening on the rail of the catwalk, and if he didn’t know better, he’d have thought he heard the sounds of twisting metal.

It was over almost before it began. The men closed the truck up and closed the warehouse door.

That’s when Louis felt the blow from behind, and the world went dark.

The headache was what woke him, along with the uncomfortably familiar feeling of bouncing over the ruts in the road.

He was in Clara’s jeep, and they were driving along a road he hadn’t seen before.

“Wha...” Speaking was difficult.

“Don’t try to talk,” Clara said. “I’ve got tape recordings of the soldiers talking about a planned massacre over the border.”

It took a moment for Louis to get over his feeling of confusion. “What the hell just happened?”

“A guard sneaked up on us. He hit you first.”

There hadn’t been much room on the catwalk. It was hard to believe that someone might have gotten to them without alerting either of them.

The look of guilt that flashed across Clara’s face could have been about missing the gunman, but Louis’s gut said there was more to it than that.

She’d taken out two gunmen on their way into the warehouse, knocking them out like an expert. No matter what television said, stunning someone without killing them was very difficult, and she seemed to have it down to a science.

“Where are we going now?”

“To warn the villagers.”

Louis frowned. “We aren’t supposed to be part of the story. We’re just here to record it.”

Clara didn’t look at him. She said, “You don’t have to go with me.”

Sighing, Louis said “Fine.” He hesitated a moment, then said, “I thought Perry hired you to keep me out of danger.

Clara grinned wanly. “You’re rubbing off on me. It must be that Lane charm.”

Louis blinked for a moment, trying to assess the meaning of that. Then he blinked.

The truck they’d seen loading the weapons before was on the side of the road, tipped over and on fire. There were soldiers scattered on the roadway, unconscious, but Louis couldn’t see any signs of visible injuries on any of them.

He glanced at Clara, who simply pursed her lips and moved the jeep carefully around the bodies.

There was a flash from the horizon, and Louis blinked. The warehouse was on fire, and the sounds of multiple explosions came to him.

“What happened back there?” he asked.

“I guess somebody didn’t put out his cigarette.” Clara carefully didn’t look at him.

There hadn’t been any explosives in the warehouse that Louis had seen, just small arms and ammunition.

He just wished that Clara didn’t look so smug.

Clara didn’t look smug. The only expression on her face was horror. She was unnaturally pale, looking as though she was going to pass out.

It was easier seeing it through a camera lens. Then Louis could pretend that it was just pictures of some long ago horror, half a century removed from current reality.

Louis lit another cigarette. One of the reasons he smoked was that it left him unable to smell. In a situation like this, that was a godsend. If his hands trembled slightly, it was only to be expected.

“We can’t change what happened here,” he said sharply to Clara. “All we can do is make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

It wasn’t all about Kerths and Pulitzers. Louis had gotten into the profession in the first place to change things. He forced the world to look at the dirty secrets and take action.

This sort of thing happened every day, and it was the reason he could not rest.

He glanced back at Clara, who had straightened and had a grim expression on her face.

She was a rookie, but she’d make it.

The Tutsis were a warm and friendly people, despite the shadow cast over their lives by the hatred being shown toward them by the rest of the country. How much of this was because of

their hope that the westerners would be able to get help, and how much was the power of the American dollar, Louis didn’t know. All that mattered was that one of the men had a telephone.

The villagers had offered them their own hut. There was only one extra in the village because of all the refugees, and Louis knew that it was something of a hardship on the others to offer that much.

Clara spoke the language fluently, and told him that it would be considered an insult to turn it down.

Truthfully, all Louis wanted to do was find a cot to roll up in. His head still hurt from earlier.

He was just sliding painfully into his cot when Clara entered the hut, pushing aside the hanging cloth that served as a door.

She sat heavily in the cot across from him and stared at him for a moment.

“How do you do it?” She asked finally.

Louis stared at the ceiling for a moment, then turned his head to look at her.

“How do you look at things like that every day and not... feel dirty?”

“Who says I don’t?” Louis asked. Clara was silent, continuing to stare, and he sighed. “What other choice do I have? It’s not like I could fly out of here and rip the guns from the soldiers’ hands. So I do the next best thing. I make sure that everybody knows what’s happening.”

If anything, Clara became more pale.

“It’s not like I don’t have feelings,” he said defensively. “You just have to put everything aside so that you can create a final testament, so that maybe their deaths might mean something.”

“So that the people who have the power might do something.” Clara bit her lip. “No matter what it might cost.”

Louis shrugged and turned over. “Hell, I’d rip the guns right out of every one of the bastards’ hands, even if I had to do it in a Halloween mask.”

He didn’t hear anything after that.

The rumble of advancing machinery was overwhelming. As far as Louis could see, the village was surrounded, and they’d blocked off all the obvious exits. At least he’d gotten the story out over the wire. He was ready to make a run for it in the jeep, but he couldn’t find Clara.

The tanks and military convoys were on the horizon and coming closer, and Louis realized that this would be his last story. He only regretted having brought Clara along with him. She’d started to grow on him, and she’d had a lot of potential.

The sound of the first explosion brought him to full alert.

Something black streaked across the sky, and a moment later it hit the first of the advancing tanks with a thunderous crash. The tank rose into the air, then fell slowly. The black streak rose again, and then hit another tank.

Cursing, Louis fumbled for his camera. He didn’t know what was happening, but he knew it was important.

Tank after tank rose and fell. The chatter of distant machine gun fire echoed through the valley, visible tracers rising toward the figure in the sky with no obvious effect.

Moments after the last tank fell, the sounds of the guns began to fade, as the black streak flashed by the truckloads of soldiers firing the weapons.

The soldiers began to flee, and around him, the villagers began to cheer.

The figure in black approached, as Louis clicked picture after picture.

It was a woman in a black body suit, with a stylized crest on her chest. Her hair was long and flowing, and her features were somehow familiar. The six-foot ball of metal in her left hand, composed of a mass of melted metal objects, wasn’t nearly as impressive as the fact that she was flying in the first place.

She tossed the metal ball into the middle of the town square, and then she landed. She took several steps toward him.

There was something about her smile that seemed so familiar. “What the hell are you?” The question slipped out before Louis could stop it.

“I’m... a friend.”

“I think, considering that I saw you first, that you owe me an exclusive.” Louis regained his composure and found his fingertips twitching for a smoke.

She frowned. “Is that a rule?”

“Well, um...no. But I’d appreciate it very much.”

“I’ve got a few things to say to the world,” she admitted. “I’ll make a deal with you. Stop smoking, and I’ll not only give you the exclusive, I’ll fly you to the UN and do a press conference with you.”

Louis’s fingers twitched convulsively, and then he pulled the pack from his pocket and threw it to the ground. “Done.”

Her smile was smug, and Louis felt himself gasping for a moment in recognition. He’d been right from the beginning. The woman wasn’t human.

A moment later he learned what it was like to fly, and he realized that it didn’t matter.

Her secret was safe with him.

THE END