

Matchmakers Files – An Unusual Proposal

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Rated: PG13

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Summary: What if Lois had grown up in Canada? What if she was in America on an expired Visa and INS wanted to deport her? Thanks to the machinations of Tempus, that is the situation Lois finds herself in. How can she avoid deportation? There are very few ways – one is to marry an American citizen...

Story Size: 94,019 words (504Kb as text)

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

A/N: In this particular story a lot of the dialogue is taken from the script text. I wish to express my thanks to my Beta readers Morgana and Ray Reynolds for their invaluable help. This was a VERY rough draft when it first landed in their hands.

I had the idea for this story recently while reading a novel. Immediately after that I re-watched a movie in which the story paralleled the novel.

Chapter 01 — Prologue

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Universal Locator Designation
Alpha 023 x Gamma 004 x Tau -120
Local designation — Canon Universe also called Prime
Distant future

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Herbert George Wells literally burst into his office in the TTEMPO building, flushed with excitement. He was barely at his desk when he called out, “Computer!”

The very feminine voice replied, “Working.”

“Computer, duration of absence?”

“Elapsed time five standard minutes.”

“Computer, I have just returned from an intensive investigation into this new universe. This is very exciting. I have quite a story to tell you, I must say. We have finally found a universe that is quite at odds with any we have encountered thus far.”

The reply was disappointing, “New file, a letter or a journal entry?”

Hearing this, Herb flopped down into his chair. As he did it squeaked in protest. He asked, “Aren’t you the least bit curious?”

The reply came from the air around him, “Curiosity is a characteristic of sentient species. Being a machine, I lack curiosity.”

His disappointment was palpable. There were times when he wished he had a close friend that he could share these moments with, and not this soulless collection of electronic components. He looked up and said, “Computer, you are no fun at all.”

“A qualitative assessment having no relevance.”

Musingly, Herb said, “I need someone to talk to, someone who will understand. Now, who would that be?” After several minutes of deep thought, Herb snapped his fingers and said aloud, “I know just the people. Computer.”

“Working.”

“I’ll be taking a brief excursion.”

“Purpose of mission.”

“Not all missions need to have a purpose, but if you must know, I desire someone that I can share this story with. Someone who will appreciate it, unlike you. In elapsed time terms for you it will seem like a long time, very many computational cycles. In objective time it may be as much as five minutes that I am away from the office. In literal time, I could be gone for a while. This story is going to take some time to relate. I just hope I don’t catch them at a bad time.”

“Destination?”

“It’s not where this time, computer, but when. I’m going to remain in Prime and visit my friends, Lois and Clark, the ones from my own personal reality. Let me see. When should be a good time? Perhaps after they babysat CJ, but before Jon. Yes, that would be the perfect time. Oh my, let me see. I visited them several times in that span. I don’t want to run into myself. Perhaps just before they left on the vacation which resulted in Jon’s conception. Yes, that would be ideal.”

[See Borrowed Time — Matchmaker Chronicles Volume](#)

Moving to a bookshelf on the side of the room, Herb pulled down a rather large leather-bound volume. On the spine, “Alpha 023 x Gamma 004 x Tau -120” was embossed in gold. Under that was printed, also in gold, “Prime”. As he pulled the book from the shelf he muttered, “I need to check and see what would be the best time to visit.” Starting at the table of contents, he started flipping through the pages. As he did, he smiled. The advances in technology were fine as far as they went, and the computer probably — no, not probably, definitely — could perform the search more quickly, but there was just something pleasurable about turning a physical page and reading actual text. Finding the chapter he was looking for, Herb read briefly before snapping the volume shut and replacing it on the shelf. As he did he said to himself, “Just as I thought, the perfect time. I had not visited them for some time and I will not again until Lois is sure of her pregnancy.”

He hadn’t even bothered to remove his hat when he had entered, so he simply grabbed his TaDT (Time and Dimensional Transport device) and headed for the door. The door mechanism sensed his bioelectromagnetic signature and opened automatically. As he exited he said, “See you later, computer. Lights off.”

As the door closed behind him the lights snapped off.

(Flashback — From Borrowed Time — Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 2)

Lois and Clark had been involved in an investigation into corruption in the office of their member of the U. S. House of Representatives. It had involved kickbacks for pork barrel projects inserted into bills as earmarks coming through his office. After the story broke, the Representative resigned from office in disgrace. The story was being considered for a Kerth award. They just had to wait for the committee’s decision.

The morning after the story was printed, when they exited the elevator, they were greeted with a banner stretched across the room that read “Congratulations — Lois and Clark”, applause from all of the staff, party poppers going off, and streamers flying. Each was handed a Mocha Latte. As Lois took an appreciative sip, Perry took the floor.

“Once again the team of Lane and Kent has scored *the* big story of the month, if not the year. So, what do the two of you have to say for yourselves?”

“Chief, it was really nothing.” said Lois. “We just happened to be in the right place at the right time to get the story.”

“Aw, come on. You know that’s not true. That’s like Elvis claimin’ that ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ was a fluke.”

“All right, so we caught some lucky breaks,” Clark said.

“I wish *all* of my reporters caught ‘lucky breaks’ like that more often. Well done, you two. What do you have in the pipeline for the future?”

“Right now we have some follow-up to do on the story. Then we would like to take a break. Can we talk to you in your office, Chief?”

“Sure, come on in.”

The three of them moved to Perry’s office. Lois and Clark sat down on the couch.

Clark started, in a matter of fact tone, “Chief, we’ve been pulling some long hours on this investigation.”

Lois added in a spirit of one-upmanship, “Actually, we’ve been pulling some long hours for a while.”

Clark offered in a weary tone, “Once we finish with the follow-up on this story, we’d like to take an honest to goodness vacation.”

Lois finished almost beseechingly, “Could you do without us for a couple of weeks?”

“Well, now, I don’t know. I might have to start runnin’ Dog Show reviews on my front page if I don’t have my top reporting team working.” Seeing their stricken looks, he relented, “Nah, I’m just funnin’. You kids deserve some time to yourselves. As soon as you’re finished with the follow-ups you’re plannin’, I won’t expect to see your faces around here for two weeks. Go and have some fun.”

“Thanks, Chief. We’ll probably be able to complete the follow-ups within the next couple of days. What do you think Lois, by Friday?”

“Friday sounds about right.”

“Good, Friday it will be. If you are done a little bit earlier than that, fine. I still won’t expect to see you until two weeks from next Monday.”

They said in unison — “Thanks, Chief!”

Thursday September 9, 1999 Sidereal 9:30 AM

They actually completed the follow-up and sent the article to Perry Thursday morning and left early. By 10:15 they were home.

Lois wearily dropped her briefcase and bag and thrust both her arms up in the air and spun around a couple of times while saying, “We now have two *glorious* weeks ahead of us. What shall we do first?”

Clark watched her cavort about and then looked at her with a wicked little gleam in his eyes and a smile on his lips and said, “I can think of one thing ... right ... off ... the ... bat.”

Lois looked back at him and said, “Reallllly?!? And what would that be, pray tell?” All the time having an equally wicked grin on her lips and an arched eyebrow.

With an attempt at a straight face, which failed, Clark said “Well, we *could* play scrabble.”

“Reallllly? Actually, I had something else in mind.” She moved over to him and put her arms around his neck and her fingers in his hair.

“Well, now that you mention it,” ... kiss ... “so” ... kiss ... “did” ... kiss ... “I.” Then he picked her up and carried her upstairs to the bedroom at super-speed.

Before Lois knew what was happening she found herself naked and under the covers with her equally naked husband beside her. She let out a contented sigh as she turned to that side, laid her head on his chest, and started drawing random patterns on his abdomen with her finger while she delivered little butterfly kisses to his chest.

“Clark, I love you sooo much, I can hardly stand it.”

Clark kissed the top of her head and said, “I love you too, honey. I never knew that I could love someone as much as I love you. You complete me the way the final piece completes a puzzle. I don’t know what I would ever do without you.” He pulled her up

and claimed her lips, and after a time they separated and caught their breath.

“Personally, I don’t want you to ever have to find out. Clark ... make love to me.”

“Your wish is my command, but first, I think we will take a shower.”

“But I took a shower this morning.”

“Ah, but you didn’t have me in there to scrub your back or wash your hair.”

With a look of desire, Lois said, “This is sounding better and better all of the time. Let’s go take a shower.”

As they got off of the bed, Clark said, “In the mornings, it’s just rush, rush, rush to get out of the house and in to work. There is no deadline now. We can take our time and enjoy it.”

Crossing the room, they entered the bathroom and Clark reached in and turned on the shower to heat the water before they entered. Once the water was hot, he allowed Lois to precede him through the curtain.

Picking up a tube of body scrub gel, he pushed a dollop onto his hands and proceeded to rub it all over her body with his hands. His touch was a soft caress as he moved his hands from shoulder to foot, touching every square inch in between.

Lois was luxuriating in the feel of his hands on her body, and she could feel the tensions that she hadn’t realized existed melt away, flushed down the drain along with the suds from the soap. Her eyes had drifted closed within seconds of him touching her, giving herself over to the sensations he was creating in her body. When he finished ministering to her body he picked up her apricot-scented shampoo and started washing her hair, using his fingers to massage her scalp as he did.

With his super-hearing he could hear her heart race and then slow, race and slow, as she was alternately calmed and aroused by his actions. After the shampoo he used her cream rinse on her hair, using his fingers to remove any tangles.

When he was finished, she turned and grabbed the tube of gel, and saying “My turn,” she squirted a dollop into her hand. She started at his shoulders and chest. As her hands moved over his body he could hear her heart race as she became excited. As she became aroused, he did also, and by the time her hands were below his waist, his arousal was evident.

The water continued to cascade over her body as she felt his hands on the sides of her head, stilling her motion. He pushed her away slightly, and then encouraged her to stand.

He pulled her into an embrace and kissed her, deeply.

While he did, he turned off the water. Reaching for a towel, Clark dried them both off, all without breaking the kiss. Once they were sufficiently dry, he floated them into the bedroom and onto the bed. Once there he finally broke the kiss and lay back.

He pulled her up for another kiss, after which she rolled off of him, and his hands started to roam over her body, reminding her of what he had just been doing to her in the shower. He was stroking her sides from shoulder to hip, teasing the outside of her breast as his hand passed by. Moving his hand more toward the front on each pass he played around her breast, avoiding direct contact, until with a whimper she grabbed his hand and placed it over her heaving breast. Her sigh of satisfaction at the contact was profound.

Now that his hand encompassed her breast, he started to gently squeeze it and roll the hard little nub of her nipple between his fingers.

This started a period of marital intimacy.

When they were finished, she released a satisfied sigh and asked, “Is it always going to be like this?”

“Is what always going to be like what?”

“Our lovemaking. Is it always going to be this good?”

He smiled, nipped her shoulder, and replied, “Nah, it’s going to get better.”

She smiled at the ceiling and said, “I don’t see how, but if you say so, I’ll take your word for it. You will have plenty of opportunity on this vacation to show me how much better it can get.”

“I look forward to it.”

They drifted off to sleep in each other’s arms for a brief nap.

At noon, when they awakened from their nap, arms and legs still entwined, they discussed what they wanted to do on their vacation.

Clark asked, “Well, we’ve already done the first thing on our agenda for this vacation, so what do you want to do second?”

Lois, with a wicked little grin, said, “More of the first thing.”

Clark replied with a chuckle, “We will have plenty of time for that first thing later. In fact, it will probably be third, fifth, and seventh... unless we decide to do some other things in between.”

“I like the way you think. It’s been a few weeks since we’ve seen your folks. Maybe we should spend a few days with them.”

“Okay, that sounds good. I know how much you like Mom’s cooking and I can see if Dad needs any help with major repairs around the farm. Since we are headed west, maybe we should plan on using our island get-away for our vacation.”

“Oooohhhh yyeesssss, lots of sun, balmy weather, and little need of clothes. I love it. Yes, let’s do that.”

“Okay. That’s the final destination. How about we spend a day or so visiting Lucy in California. You haven’t seen her in a while.”

“I’d love to, and I’m sure she would like to see us. Now, for packing, I won’t need much for the island, but are we going to go anywhere else?”

“Well, we could go out to dinner a few times, maybe to Waikiki or Honolulu. While we are with Luce, we could see some of the sights in San Diego. She is living in Torrey Pines now. I understand there is a rather nice golf club there. You could brush up on your game.”

“Oh, Clark, this is going to be a vacation for the books. We are already off to a good start with the first thing on the list. When do we get to number three?”

Laughing, Clark replied, “I think we need to pack and fly to Smallville. After dinner, if you’re a good girl, it may be time for number three, but number two is getting to Smallville.”

Lois bounced out of bed and started rushing around the room getting out bags and clothes, not bothering to put anything on. Clark simply lay there watching his naked wife as she moved around the room, noting the bounce of her breasts and the sway of her hips. He said, “Saucy wench, you know, if you keep that up, number three and number two may have to switch places.”

With an exaggerated sway to her hips putting the point to his comment, she sashayed over to the side of the bed, and leaning in, she claimed his lips in a kiss. She giggled as he pulled her down and rolled them over, so that he was on top, and deepened the kiss. When they came up for air, Lois asked, “What about Smallville?”

“It’ll still be there when we’re done here. We’ll just get there a little later.” With a squeal of delight she opened herself to him. When they finished, they simply lay in each other’s arms for a while. Finally, Clark said, “Okay, now for the new number three. I guess while you start to pack I’ll call my folks and let them know we’re coming.”

“The packing shouldn’t take much time since I won’t need much. A couple of dresses for when we go out, maybe a swim suit — which shouldn’t get much use at all — and some casual clothes for Smallville and San Diego. Shouldn’t take more than a half an hour or so.”

Clark had taken Lois to this deserted tropical island previously on another vacation. Between then and now, Clark had built a more substantial cabin with kitchen and bath facilities, with the idea of having it as a getaway location for just such a time as this. It didn’t have power so there was no air conditioning, but in that climate none was really needed. There also was no TV or radio to

alert Clark to any emergencies. Clark had notified the authorities that he would be leaving soon on a mission, hinting that it could be related to New Krypton, and that he would be unavailable for a couple of weeks.

Just as they were about to leave, there was a knock at the door. Lois wondered out loud, “I wonder who that could be?”

Sliding his glasses down his nose, Clark used his x-ray vision and muttered, just loud enough for Lois to hear, “Oh, no! Not him!”

“Him who?” Lois asked.

“Herb!”

“Oh, no. Not him!” she echoed.

Resigned, Clark said, “I guess we’d better let him in.”

“Can’t we sneak out the back?”

In a resigned tone, he pointed out, “What good would that do? He knows everything about us and what we do. To him it’s history. He knows we’re here or he wouldn’t have stopped by. You don’t really want him showing up on the island do you?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I just hope it isn’t something that will foul up our plans for the vacation.”

He pointed out, “How could it? If he needs us to go somewhere he can bring us back to the minute after we left and we’d still have our vacation ahead of us.”

“Hey, that’s right! Well, don’t just stand there, let him in.”

Opening the door, Clark greeted the visitor, “Hi, Herb! What brings you around?”

Herb was so happy that he was almost bouncing in place. He was anxious to tell his story to an audience that would appreciate all of the nuances, unlike his computer assistant, who had no appreciation for the finer things in life, like a good story. As he stepped in, he saw Lois behind Clark and addressed both of them, “Greetings and felicitations. I really didn’t mean to interrupt your vacation plans, but I just needed to talk to *some*one. I have a story to tell and I knew you would appreciate this tale.”

Lois’s curiosity was piqued and she asked, “Is this about the other Clark? Did he find his Lois?”

As Clark took his derby, Herb replied, “In a manner of speaking, yes, but realistically, no. This is an alt-Clark and an alt-Lois, but not the one you met, another couple.”

Lois asked, “Shall I make some refreshments?”

“Oh, no, no, nothing for me. I don’t want to delay you any more than is necessary.”

Clark said, “Okay then, why don’t we go into the living room and make ourselves comfortable?”

As they entered the living room, Herb spotted the wingback chair that he had enjoyed on several previous visits. As Lois and Clark settled onto the sofa and snuggled together, Herb sat in the chair and marshaled his thoughts before speaking, “How to begin? I must say that this was an exciting discovery. One of our survey teams stumbled on a new universe, Alpha 223 x Gamma 104 x Tau 155, and brought the report of their findings to me. Naturally I was anxious to observe this new couple immediately. Once in their universe, of course I had to go back in their timeline so that I could determine how they had gotten to where we found them. It was truly amazing ... so different from any other universe we have discovered to this point. I wonder just how many have followed this new pattern.”

In an anxious tone, Lois said, “Well, don’t keep us in suspense, Herb. Tell us all about it. What made it so different?”

Herb smiled at this response. Lois was anxious to hear his story, unlike his computer assistant. He began, “Well, for one thing, this Lois was not born and raised in Metropolis! She was a Canadian.”

Stunned, Lois blurted out, “Canadian? How did that happen?”

“Okay, well, you see, it was this way ...”

Chapter 02

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 223 x Gamma 104 x Tau 155

Local designation — Alternate Universe Canadian 1

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Sam Lane had always been a progressive thinker who was willing to try new avenues of treatment in his medical practice. Early on, shortly after beginning his practice, he had first had an affair with and then married his nurse, Ellen. This circumstance was not unheard of, and did not result in any negative commentary within the medical community, and things went well for a time.

Then came the fateful day that Sam ran afoul of the medical establishment. He had a string of patients, all exhibiting similar symptomatology. Eventually they were all diagnosed with a variant of Lyme disease. The accepted treatment was a course of high dose I.V. antibiotics, but in searching the literature, he found that this treatment was only successful if the disease were caught within the first few weeks of infection. That being the case, he tried a therapy that was outside of the allopathic medical playbook. The therapy he tried was actually very simple: ozone, dissolved in normal saline solution, administered by I.V., and a high potency vitamin regimen to boost the body's immune system. When the treatment worked he began to write papers documenting his results. The medical community claimed that his results were anecdotal, and since he had not performed any double-blind studies, his results were called into question. The problem came in with the fact that Big Pharma insisted that there were antibiotics out there for the condition and his was a non-pharmaceutical based treatment. Big Pharma carries a lot of weight, and through their willing accomplices within the medical community, pressure was applied to Doctor Sam Lane.

Finally the pressure from the pharmaceutical manufacturers and the other members of the medical establishment became too much. When his clientele started to fall off as a result, he decided that a change of venue was indicated. Having made up his mind, he immigrated to Canada, taking up residence in Montreal. He even went so far as to renounce his U.S. citizenship. To keep peace in the family, his wife Ellen followed him, not only moving to Montreal, but also going so far as to renounce her U.S. citizenship.

Shortly after they moved, Ellen Lane discovered she was pregnant with their first child. The child, Lois Olive Lane, was born on September 23, 1967, in Montreal. Sam was rather disappointed that the child had been a girl, but consoled himself that this was just the first and maybe the next would be a boy. However, four years later when little Lucy was born, his disappointment was palpable. He started spending more and more time in the office. Having been born in Montreal, the children were Canadian citizens.

Lois's parents were not fluent in French – at least not completely. Sam had taken French in school, and was not what you would call fluent, but he was good enough to pass the required fluency test for his license. Sam made an effort to become more fluent because of his clientele. He and Ellen spoke English in the home, because Ellen's French was abominable, but in school and with their friends, Lois and Lucy spoke French almost exclusively and were therefore bilingual. Because of school and friends, the time they spent speaking French exceeded the time speaking English, and consequently the English they spoke was heavily accented by the French.

Like most Canadian children, Lois was involved in winter sports growing up. She enjoyed cross country and Alpine skiing, ice skating, both figure and speed, and snowshoeing. She was also an avid hockey fan, and being from Montreal, naturally her favorite team was the Canadians. During the long cold winters, Lois took every opportunity to ski. There was ample opportunity

for Alpine skiing and she did that most weekends, but she really loved cross-country. Since they lived in the suburbs, she would strap on her skis, throw her schoolbooks into a backpack, and ski to school on a daily basis rather than take the bus. She even tried out for the Canadian Olympic Cross Country Ski Team. She was one of the youngest competitors and was really crushed when she failed to qualify. She was seventh in a field of over forty-five where only the top five qualified after seven heats. She also tried out for the biathlon, but although she could handle the cross-country portion, her marksmanship was inadequate to the task. In school, Lois was an outstanding student and was a class leader all through school. A lot of this was an attempt on Lois's part to win approbation from her more and more absentee father.

After the birth of Lucy, Ellen stayed at home, becoming a housewife and mother. This was when Sam started working on prosthetic devices and actual replacement structures that went beyond simple knee and shoulder replacements, giving the recipient increased endurance and strength.

When Ellen had decided to stay at home and raise the children, Sam had hired a young woman, fresh out of nursing school, to replace her.

When Sam started staying late in the office doing his 'research', Ellen suspected that he was having an affair with his new assistant. Based upon how she and Sam had started their relationship, an affair wasn't difficult to believe, true or not. Ellen Lane started drinking as a result of her perceived abandonment, and Lois found herself having increased responsibility for her sister, Lucy. It would have been easy for Lois to have resented Lucy for the time required to care for her when their mom was unable to due to her drinking. That was when Sam actually did separate from them by divorcing Ellen.

The times that Lois had to care for her sister became more and more frequent as time went on, and finally, Sam tried to step in and take Lois and Lucy away from their mother because of Ellen's incapacity.

He and Lois had a big fight, but by that time, Lois was old enough to petition the courts to be emancipated. Being emancipated meant that she didn't have to go to a foster home, nor did she have to go with her father and his new girlfriend, and could continue to live with her mother, but it was by her choice, heavily influenced by her concern for Lucy. The deal was that since she continued to live with her mother and provide the principle care for Lucy, she didn't have to pay rent. She had a part-time job working at the local paper, Le Journal de Montreal, a French paper, while she completed school.

By the time Lois was ready to graduate from secondary school, Lucy was fourteen and able to take care of herself, more or less, and Lucy opted to remain with their mother when Lois left for to study at Ryerson University in Toronto. Part of the deal was that Sam would pay for her university education. Naturally, he wanted Lois to go to medical school and join him in his practice, but she had a mind of her own and her love of writing won out. In her sophomore year she declared as a journalism major and joined the school newspaper.

Lois continued her part-time work with the local paper all the way through her university years. In the course of time, when Lois graduated, she worked her way into a full-time position with Le Journal de Montreal, and then moved to the Montreal Gazette because they were an English speaking paper, where she became a reporter. She worked on improving her English and tried to suppress her French accent.

After a short time, Lois felt a need to move to a larger newspaper, so she applied for a visa and traveled to Metropolis, where she interviewed with Perry White, Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Planet.

Perry was behind his desk flipping through a portfolio of newspaper clippings, each of which bore the Lois Lane byline. He recognized her byline even in the articles in the French-language *Le Journal de Montreal* which were in the portfolio. He wished he could have read them because he was sure they would have been interesting reading. As he went through her stories from the *Montreal Gazette*, there were various ‘Hmmmms’ and ‘Ahhhhhs’ as he flipped through the folder. On one, he placed his forefinger on a sentence, looked up, and asked, “What is an MP? Down here, that would be Military Police.”

Looking at the page upside-down to see to what he was referring, she replied, “MP? Oh, that would be a Minister of Parliament. Like one of your senators.”

Nodding, he said, “Oh, very interesting.”

Flipping another page, he stopped and asked, “RCMP?”

Lois smiled and said, “I think you commonly use MPD for the Metropolis Police Department. Well, RCMP would be the abbreviation of the name for the Canadian national police force, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. They don’t ride horses or use dog sleds anymore, except for show, occasionally.”

Closing the book, Perry looked her up and down, noting the conservative dress that she was wearing. The hem of her skirt was several inches below the knee, the blouse she was wearing had a high neckline with a single strand gold necklace, and she was wearing spike heels. Perry thought she was wearing the heels to partially disguise her petite stature. After thus sizing her up, he asked, “Why do you want to work here? It looks like you were doing just fine in Montreal.”

With a very sincere tone, Lois replied, “I’ve always wanted to work for the premiere newspaper in the world, and that is most definitely the *Daily Planet*.”

Perry folded his hands and rested them on the closed binder. He gave her a piercing gaze as he asked the next question, “What make you think you’re good enough to work for the *Planet*?”

Lois put on an air of confidence as she replied, “I’m a hard worker and I stick with a story until I have an answer.”

Perry challenged, “What if you are going up against a powerful politician?”

Lois was confident in this answer, “If they have something to hide, the public needs to know about it. If there is corruption, it needs to be brought into the open. I think you saw in the article which exposed that Minister that I’m not intimidated by politicians.”

“Well, I don’t usually go out on a limb like this, but I like your style. I like what I saw in your portfolio.” Sitting forward, Perry held out his hand and said, “Welcome to the *Daily Planet*.”

Lois was excited, but put on a composed front as she took his hand and shook it. “Thank you, Mr. White. You won’t regret your decision.”

In fact, Perry White never regretted his decision to hire Lois Lane. She quickly became one of the premiere reporters in the city, if not the world.

There was one incident.

Perry had received a request from the Paris bureau that he allow the transfer of Claude Rocheret to the Metropolis office. Grudgingly, he had allowed the transfer since Claude came highly recommended by the head of the Paris bureau. He agreed only reluctantly, because through the grapevine he had also heard there might be problems with Claude, but since the warnings weren’t emphatic, he allowed the transfer. It didn’t take long for Perry to figure out that the Paris bureau had taken advantage of Perry’s good nature and foisted a problem onto him.

It didn’t take very long to see that Claude was a ladies’ man, which he actually didn’t find too surprising considering that he was French. He went through the female staffers like a hot knife through soft butter. He wasn’t too particular. Any single female in

the area sooner or later became the object of his attention. He had confined himself mostly to the research and ancillary staff, avoiding the other reporters, then came the fateful day.

One day as Lois was coming out of the supply closet she saw Claude and Ralph at the coffee machine. Not desiring to have to talk to either of them she didn’t step out, but out of curiosity listened to what was being said because the topic intrigued her. Claude had apparently been bragging about the women he had been able to bed.

They continued their conversation. Ralph asked, “Claude, how do you do it?”

“Ah, for me it is easy.”

“Tell me, how can I get the girls the way you do?”

“Ah, well, you see, these American girls are fascinated by my French accent. I simply make it stronger when I want to seduce one of them.”

“Can you teach me?”

Claude looked him up and down before saying, “I don’t think so. You are too ... American.”

Ralph riposted, “I bet there’s one you can’t get into your bed.”

Claude, sensing a challenge, asked, “Want to wager?”

Ralph smiled and said, “Sure. What stakes?” Ralph was sensing a sure thing.

“Let’s make it interesting. How about fifty of your dollars?”

Ralph smiled. It was like taking candy from a baby. “Sure. You’re on. How long will it take?”

Claude thought for only a second before replying, “Only three days.”

Ralph smiled and planned what he would do with the fifty dollars that he would have before the weekend, “Are you sure that’s long enough?”

Claude spoke confidently, “It is for me. Who shall it be?”

Ralph smiled and said, “Lane.”

Claude, confident in his wiles, smiled and said, “Ah, she and the fifty dollars will be mine before the week is out.”

Claude and Ralph separated and returned to their desks.

Lois was angry. She didn’t want Ralph to win, but losing would require that she do something she was loath to do. Ralph would just have to win.

The next day, Lois arrived in the bull pen dressed in a low-cut top showing just a hint of cleavage, with a skirt much shorter than she normally wore with a hem just below her knees.

Like a bee to a flower, Claude was circling her desk almost as soon as she arrived. In a very thick French accent, he said “*My, vous are zo zery beautiful zis morning.*”

Lois smiled at the compliment and said, “Thank you.” She looked him up and down before she said, “Your suit is rather rumpled and your shoes could use a shine.”

Stung by her criticism, Claude tried to recover and emphasized his accent all the more, “*Ah, zat ees because I have been zo terribly deestracted by vous.*”

“Oh, you have been terribly distracted by all the other women here in the newsroom. Why am I suddenly the target of your distraction?”

“*Because vous are zo zery beautiful zis morning.*”

Lois looked at him and said, “Can it buster. What you never bothered to find out is that I am French Canadian. Your French accent doesn’t intrigue me; I grew up with a French accent myself, although I’ve worked to overcome it.” To prove her point she finished, in French, “*Maintenant, retourne donc à ton bureau, avec ton costume pas repassé et tes chaussures usées. Laisse-moi tranquille. Je ne suis pas intéressée.*” [Translation — “Now, take your rumpled suit and scuffed shoes and return to your desk. Leave me alone. I’m not interested.”]

As she was speaking, Claude’s face fell, and chagrined, he realized that he had been set up by Ralph. Looking in Ralph’s

direction, Claude could see him laughing and rubbing his hands together in glee. He muttered, “Ice queen,” turned, and returned to his desk, defeated. She had just cost him fifty dollars. He would have to think of a way to get it back, if not in cash, then in some other way.

That started a long-running uneasy working relationship between Lois and Claude.

Lois was careful about her story ideas and materials, especially after she heard a rumor going around about stories being stolen. No one was able to prove anything, but everyone seemed convinced that the culprit was Claude. There was a short spurt of thefts and then it went away.

Occasionally, Claude would try his wiles on Lois, but she rebuffed him every time.

Eventually, Lois heard that as a result of her rejection and to cover his own failings, Claude had started a rumor behind her back that she was frigid. He had christened her ‘The Ice Queen’ so that the rejection would look like her problem and not his failure.

After hearing this, Lois became more determined to be the outstanding journalist that she already was. Her tenacity earned her the nickname ‘Mad Dog Lane’ because when she got her teeth into a story it was as difficult to get her off of it as it would be to take a bone away from a mad dog. Slowly, this nickname overcame Ice Queen when people gathered around the coffee station and behind her back.

She had heard the snickers, and had even heard ‘Mad Dog Lane’ whispered, and she actually smiled. She’d rather that nickname than ‘Ice Queen’ any day.

Finally, it happened to her! She had been called by a source demanding an immediate meeting and she had forgotten her notes for a story on the shared printer.

A couple of days later ‘her’ story appeared in the paper with Claude’s byline. She was angry, but there was no way to prove that it had been her story. She still took her notes and went to Perry White about it. “Perry, I think I had a story stolen.”

“What makes you think so, darlin?”

“That story of Claude’s that you just printed. That was my story. I was working on that.”

“Well, I don’t know what to say. Sometimes two reporters could find that they are working on the same story and not even know it.”

“But Perry ...”

“But nothing. There’s nothing I can do about it. There have been other complaints, but there’s nothing I can do about it because there is no way to prove anything. I wish there was, but there is just no way short of finding notes in your handwriting in his possession that I can do anything. If you’re convinced that he stole your story, what you need to do in the future is see to it that you don’t leave your story notes lying around. Use this as a learning experience. Now, go on, get out of here and bring me in a story worthy of the front page. Oh, wait, before I forget about it. I had a call from Personnel. Your visa has almost expired. If you plan to stay with us you need to apply for permanent residency.”

“Thanks for the reminder. I’ll get right on it.”

Returning to her desk, Lois called her immigration attorney and asked that he prepare the application. He assured her that the forms would be completed and ready for her signature in a week.

The following week, Lois went to her lawyer’s office and signed the appropriate forms.

A few days later she had a call. “Daily Planet, Lois Lane. How can I help you?”

“Ms. Lane, this is Mrs. Delaney at the Immigration and Naturalization Service office.”

“Ah, Mrs. Delaney. I wasn’t expecting the granting of permanent residency quite so quickly.”

“Well, Ms. Lane, this call is about that, but I’m afraid that it isn’t to inform you that it has been granted. There is a problem with your application and I am calling to inform you of it. It will take some time to iron out the problem and it is causing us to impose certain conditions on your application.”

“Problem? What kind of problem?”

“Actually, that is confidential information. I will say that we received a phone call from an anonymous source that caused us to flag your file.”

“Anonymous call? Conditions? What kind of conditions?”

“Well, this is somewhat embarrassing, but we have to look into it. Until the investigation is complete we must request that you limit your travel to the United States. The period of this restriction should not exceed one year. However, any travel outside of the United States during that time could jeopardize your application.”

Lois was shocked. Her thoughts were in a whirl. An anonymous tip! What could that be about? Could it be about her father? This would keep her from visiting her mother and sister. Oh, well. She hadn’t seen them in almost two years and hadn’t really been planning a visit anyhow. “No problem. I wasn’t planning any extensive travel anyhow. Is that all there is to it?”

“Yes, that is the only condition. We will contact you if there are any other complications. If you don’t hear anything more, your application will be processed.”

“Thank you for your time, Mrs. Delaney.” Lois placed the phone back in its cradle and sat back thinking for a time, puzzling over these revelations.

Five months had passed without incident, and then Lois received a call. “Daily Planet, Lois Lane.”

“Ah, just the person I wanted to talk to. How is tall, dark and stoic?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Uh, sorry. Too soon. Listen, I’ve got a hot tip for you. There is a shipment of illegal arms on its way to Brazzaville. It departed the Metropolis harbor with the tide at midnight last night.”

Lois gasped, “That’s in the Congo. You mean that someone here in Metropolis is supplying arms to the rebels.”

“Well, I think you’ll have to go there and see for yourself, now won’t you.”

Her questions had been piling up, and finally, Lois interrupted Herb and asked, “The INS received a phone call that caused them to flag her file? What’s that all about?”

Nodding, Herb replied, “I didn’t know it at the time. I had rather assumed that the call had been made by Claude, but that assumption turned out to be wrong. Actually, I looked into the source later and found that the call had been made by Tempus.”

Lois blurted out, “Tempus again! Why can’t he leave us, uh, them, no I do mean us, they are us, in a manner of speaking. Why can’t he leave us alone?”

Herb shrugged and replied, “It has almost become a psychosis. He is driven to distraction attempting to disrupt your union and thereby destroy Utopia.”

Lois continued, “Herb, that other call, the one about the guns, sounds like the call that I got. I went to the Congo on that investigation. I almost died there.”

Clark pulled her closer and said, “I, for one, am very glad that you didn’t.”

Suddenly becoming very serious, Herb looked at Lois and said, “That call was also placed by Tempus.”

Shocked, Lois and Clark both gasped and blurted out, “What? Tempus! Again?”

“Yes, Tempus. I can now tell you something that I had not been able to relate previously. Tempus was actively attempting to interfere in your lives much earlier than you knew. Earlier, he tried

to work from the shadows, much as you did, Clark, before you created the Superman persona. It wasn't until you met him, when he was accompanying me shortly after our first meeting, that he came out of the shadows into the open, as you did when you became Superman. That call came at a time when you could not be made aware of what was happening and your special destiny. I too had to work in the shadows, as it were. I became aware of what Tempus had done, and without your knowledge, I made the arrangements to get you out of your predicament and back to Metropolis."

"Yeah, I might have died if Derek Price, the office manager of the Brazzaville office, hadn't sent the national police after me. I wondered how he even knew I was in the country. I always wondered how they knew I was in trouble and just where I was. The police showed up in the nick of time. I was thankful that Suzanne and Collette, the twins from the office, came with them. It was nice to have a couple of girls there. They helped a lot. I guess I owe you another thank you."

"It was my pleasure. Actually, it was your friend, Clark, the one from the first alternate universe — you know, the one that helped with Tempus — who told me about the Brazzaville office. In his universe, when I took him back to find his Lois, he made friends with the staff. Those two girls helped him through a very difficult time, I must say. They were friends, in the truest sense.

(See [Clark and Lois — The Lost Years Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 3](#) and [Clark and Lois — Despair to Hope Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 4](#))

That is all in the past now. But to return to this instance, I suppose I could have intervened, but it turned out that this Lois's life was not put in danger by his call, so I chose not to. It never occurred to me that Tempus's purpose could actually have been as sinister and subtle as it truly was."

"Oh, yes, there is another thing that you should know. It was Tempus that created the controversy within the medical community that caused Sam Lane to immigrate to Canada. It was all part of Tempus's evil plan. This was one of his most far-reaching and more subtle ploys."

Anxious to hear more, Lois said, "Well, don't stop there. This story is just getting interesting."

Herb smiled at her comment and replied, "Yes, it is, isn't it? All right, so ... Lois received a call about illegal arms ..."

Chapter 03

After Lois received the call about the illegal arms shipment, she went to Perry White. Nervous energy and the thrill of the chase prevented her from sitting or even standing still, so she was pacing back and forth in front of Perry's desk, waving her arms for emphasis. "Perry, I just got a hot tip on a story! This could be the big one. This goes way beyond a Kerth! I mean, this could go all the way to the Pulitzer Prize. Get this, illegal gun shipments, gunrunning from right here in Metropolis." She stopped her pacing, put her hands on the front of Perry's desk and leaned in almost nose to nose with Perry as she said, "Chief, you've got to let me run with this. This is it! I can almost taste it."

Perry couldn't remember when he had seen Lois this worked up before, and he was pleased that she was so excited about this story, but he could see that she hadn't checked the water level as yet. He needed her to go about this story in a way that would warrant publication. He agreed that if this story panned out it could easily result in a Pulitzer for his favorite reporter. In the time she had been working for him, Lois had wormed her way into his affections, and he looked on her almost as the daughter that he had never had. He decided that he needed to bring her back down to Earth, so he leaned back and calmly asked, "What is your source? Where's your corroborating evidence?"

Instantly deflated by his lack of enthusiasm, Lois straightened up and thought before speaking, "Well, the source was

anonymous, but that happens a lot." She realized she had approached Perry prematurely. She really knew better. It was simply the magnitude of the story that had caused her to leap before checking the water level. That was a problem that she would have to work on, but right now she quickly planned how to comply with his requirements. "I don't have any evidence, yet, but I'll get it."

Perry leaned forward again, folded his hands on his desk as he replied, "I agree with you, the story has potential, but you need to bring me something concrete. I need to see facts. Bring me some proof and I'll back you, but until I see something supporting the tip, it's a no go."

Lois was disappointed in herself for not making sure she had all of her ducks in a row before approaching Perry, but undaunted, she said, "Okay, Perry. I'll get my evidence and come back to you."

Perry liked her enthusiasm. He always had; it was one of the things that made her such a great reporter. She pursued every story with a level of enthusiasm that he had seen in very few reporters. He nodded and said, "You do that, darlin'. Now get out of here, I have work to do," he said as he picked up a blue pencil.

Somewhat subdued, Lois returned to her desk, and with renewed determination, started making calls. The first call she made was to the harbor master. He confirmed that a ship had indeed sailed the previous night and that its itinerary included a number of calls at ports along the African coast. She requested the itinerary. She scribbled down the names as they were rattled off. She checked and found that one of the ports listed, Point Noir, was the main port city of the Congo. Lois made note of this and called the harbor master back and asked that a copy of the bill of lading be faxed to her. So far, things were falling into place nicely.

When the fax came in, she started going over it very carefully. There was one glaring entry: the cargo listed as being destined for the Congo was registered as farming equipment. Reading that, Lois snickered and scoffed, "Farming equipment going to a country that is mostly rain forest, really. If that isn't phony I'll eat my hat." The second piece of the puzzle had just fallen into place.

On the bill of lading she found the name of the company responsible for the shipment. The name of the company was, 'L&M Enterprises, Inc.'. The initials didn't mean anything to her, but she decided that if the rest panned out, she would have to investigate the company. She would have to find out who the owners were.

She started checking on L&M Enterprises' holdings and found that they had some warehouse space down by the docks. She thought, <If this isn't a one-off, they may have more in storage. It might just be a good idea to check.> She checked on the address of the warehouse and was determined to see what was still in it.

After work, Lois went home and changed into her snooping clothes, a black turtleneck, black jeans and black running shoes. She wore a small pouch on her belt that carried her 'tools' and carried a black ski mask that she would put on at the appropriate time. She bided her time until it was quite dark, and then drove to the vicinity of the warehouse and parked. She remained in her car watching. It was a good thing that she did, because she spotted a roving guard. When she spotted him, she watched his routine and timed his route. Her surveillance lasted an hour and a half before she satisfied herself that she knew his routine. As soon as he passed on his next round, she knew almost to the minute how much time she had. Quietly exiting her Jeep, she crossed to the warehouse and rounded a corner looking for a side or back door. Lois had never had a partner, and that was the case now. That meant that she didn't have anyone to watch her back for her. She knew that she had to find a door and achieve entry before the guard returned on his rounds. Finding a door at the back, Lois pulled out her lock picks and went to work. The lock on the door quickly yielded itself to her skill with her lock picks. Once inside,

she closed the door, although she did not lock it. Since the building had no windows, she pulled a mini-flashlight from her bag without fear of discovery, and began examining the contents of the warehouse. She quickly found a number of crates stacked on pallets around the floor in such a way that it was obvious that they were staged for shipment. On the side of the crates were stenciled the words ‘Farming Equipment’ in big black letters, the same words that she had seen on the bill of lading, so she decided that she needed to examine the contents.

Finding a crowbar leaning against the wall, she proceeded to open a crate near the back of the room. As soon as she started, there was a loud screech as the nails were pulled from the wood and she stopped to listen, hoping she hadn’t attracted the guard’s attention. When there was no pounding at the door or any other sounds for almost a minute, she resumed, slowly, moving a millimeter at a time to remove the panel. Once it was open she saw that it was loaded with rifles — assault weapons. Since there were no windows in the warehouse, she had no fear of her camera’s flash being seen, so she took photos of what she found, crates and weapons alike, but knew those pictures alone wouldn’t prove that something similar was on the ship. What she had found so far was perfectly legal. Shippers can handle weapons, even those that are illegal in most localities, with impunity. The problem comes in when they try to sell them to people that aren’t supposed to get them. The markings on the crates could be excused as an error on the part of a warehouse.

Before placing the lid back on, she ripped a piece of burlap from the wrappings of the weapons, and used it to muffle the blows she delivered with the back of the crowbar. In this way she silently closed the crate back up. Checking her watch, she saw that if she were to exit at that moment she would walk right into the arms of the patrolling guard, so she waited. When she thought the time was right, she cracked the door open and peeked out. Seeing a deserted area, she slipped out and relocked the door. After moving to a position with an unobstructed view, being extra cautious, she lay down in deep shadow at the corner of the building and waited for the guard to pass. Once he had passed, she arose and silently made her way back to the Jeep.

Lois was very pleased with how this trip had gone. She had gotten in and out, undetected, and now she had the other half of what she needed for Perry to back her on the story. Now she could show that there were arms in the warehouse. That increased the likelihood that crates with similar contents were on the ship, but it also meant that she needed to see similar crates offloaded in Point Noir.

She knew that the ship was due to dock in Point Noir in four days, according to the information the harbor master had sent her. That would be just about the amount of time it would take to get there and be waiting for the ship to dock. She drove home in high spirits with visions of Pulitzer Prizes dancing before her eyes.

After a restless night with little sleep, she headed into work. As soon as she was out of the elevator, she looked around, and spotting Jimmy, she shouted, “Jimmy!”

At her call, Jimmy’s head bobbed up and he shouted, “Yeah, Lois, what’cha need?”

She hurried down the ramp and handed Jimmy the roll of film. She said, “I need this developed, immediately!”

“But, Perry has me working on these obits.”

“I don’t care! This takes priority! Get right on it!”

“But what about Perry?”

“I’ll handle Perry. You just get yourself into the darkroom and if you wreck these photos, there’ll be hell to pay.”

Realizing how useless it was to argue with ‘Mad Dog Lane’ when she got this way, he acceded to her request and headed for the darkroom.

A little later Jimmy brought the prints to her. As he dropped them into her hands, he asked, “Are those what I think they are?”

Assault weapons?”

Lois nodded and said, “Right the first time. Now you see how important these pictures are.” Looking around, Lois saw that Perry was in his office. She picked up the bill of lading and added it to the prints of the pictures she had taken and went to Perry White’s office. She didn’t even knock, she just barged in.

When she did, Perry looked up from the copy he was editing and gave her a glare. “Can’t you see I’m busy? You know, most people knock before entering my office.”

“This couldn’t wait, Perry.” She strode to the front of Perry’s desk, and as she dropped the prints on it, she said, “How about that for evidence? There are the weapons, sitting in the warehouse of the company that my source claimed was sending the shipments, waiting for the next ship.”

“How do you know that, and what’s to say that the same thing is on this ship?”

She produced the bill of lading and put it on top of the prints, “Farming equipment. Give me a break. The bill of lading specifies the same thing for the crates on the ship. I don’t know any farming that requires assault rifles.”

“Okay, you’ve convinced me. Maybe we should alert the authorities.”

“I’ll do that once I’m in country. I want to be there to record the bust.”

“Okay, I’ll authorize the trip. Arrange your flight through the travel office. I’ll see you when you get back, and I want you to be careful. These kinds of people can be dangerous.”

“I know and I will be. When I arrive, I’ll check in through the Brazzaville office.”

“Yeah, check in with Derek Price, he’s an old friend of mine. I haven’t seen him much since he took over in Brazzaville.” Perry decided to hedge his bet and notify Derek of Lois’s impending arrival himself, just in case she decided while en route that she would act all on her own, the way she usually did.

“I’ll do that, Perry. See you in about a week.” She rushed out of his office and called travel from her desk. She made arrangements to pick up the ticket at the airport and went home to pack.

When she arrived in Brazzaville, two raven-haired beauties were there to meet her. They introduced themselves as Suzanne and Collette Black. They were identical twin sisters that worked in the Brazzaville office of the Daily Planet. Perry White had called Derek Price and alerted him about Lois’s trip, and Derek had dispatched the girls when he had heard that her plane was due.

“Bonjour, je m’appelle Suzanne, et voici ma sœur Collette.

Nous allons nous occuper de vos bagages et aller au bureau.”

{Hello, my name is Suzanne and this is my sister, Collette. We will collect your luggage and go to the office.}

Lois was surprised at being addressed in French, but responded in kind. “Merci, j’apprécie votre aide. Vous parlez toujours en français ? Ça fait quelques années que je n’ai pas pratiqué le mien, depuis que j’ai quittée le Canada pour m’installer aux Etats-Unis. {“Thank you. I appreciate the help. Do you speak French all of the time? It has been a couple of years since I have used my French, ever since I moved to America from French Canada.”}

“Bien sûr. Nous étions une colonie française. Le français est devenu notre lanque principale, devant l’anglais.” {“Of course. This used to be a French colony. French has become the first language, with English the second.”}

They collected her luggage and took her to the office before taking her to their hotel.

When they arrived at the office, she found that Derek had decided it would be unsafe for Lois to travel by herself, so he had assigned Suzanne and Collette to accompany her.

The twins had offered to put Lois up in the apartment they

shared. Lois spent that evening with Suzanne and Collette. They had dinner at Le Jardin and then went to the twins' apartment where they had an impromptu pajama party, drinking wine, eating cheese and discussing everything from friends and family to work. Lois enjoyed the time with the twins immensely and enjoyed being able to use her native French again.

Since the girls had a Land Rover, the three of them loaded into it the following morning for the trip to Point Noir.

On the trip the twins were all excited about a man they called Coquinos that had recently been working with them. He was one person that they hadn't mentioned the previous night. He was a journalist who was traveling around the world and picking up short time positions with papers to earn enough money to continue his travels. Both of the twins had been attracted to him. He was friendly, but somewhat distant. The twins couldn't say enough about him. He was tall, dark and very handsome. To put it succinctly, he was a dreamboat. He was an excellent writer, although they both laughed at the subject matter for some of his articles. There was one article that they found particularly amusing, 'The Mating Habits of the Knob-Tailed Gecko' which he had written for a paper on Borneo. They decried the fact that he just couldn't seem to stay in one place for very long. They said a lot about him, but the one thing that was never mentioned was his name, he was always simply Coquinos. He had just left the previous week and they were hoping that he would decide to come back.

The use of the nickname 'Coquinos' told Lois that there was a loving feeling attached to the relationship, and since both of the girls used the same endearment, it seemed that both of the girls had a crush on him. The tone of the endearment was slightly sexual (very slightly). It is formed on the word 'coquin' which could mean either puckish or naughty, which told Lois that the girls had tried, perhaps in vain, to make a pass at him. That would explain their use of that nickname as some funny way to accept his refusal to have a relationship with either of them. Lois regretted that he had left because she was intrigued by the girl's description.

The trip to Point Noir took about six hours, the better part of the day, and they were stopped a couple of times by bandits that wanted bribes that they called tolls for the use of the road.

Before leaving Brazzaville, Lois had called the national police force and reported the name of the steamer and its expected arrival time in Point Noir. She and the girls timed their arrival so they would be there when the ship docked.

They met the detachment of the national police when they arrived and they waited for the ship to dock. When the ship didn't dock on time, the constable in charge went to the harbor master's office to make an inquiry.

When he returned he had a downcast expression. He called his team and the girls together before he gave his report, "Je viens de parler avec la capitainerie. On m'a informé que le bateau navire que nous poursuivions a coulé dans la tempête d'hier.. Toutes les marins ont été perdus en mer. Nous ne seront pas confisquer toute cargaison. Au moins les rebelles n'obtiendrez pas cette cargaison d'armes." {"I have just spoken with the harbor master. I have been informed that the ship we were after sank in the storm yesterday. All hands were lost at sea. We will not be confiscating any cargo. At least the rebels will not be getting this shipment of arms."}

To say that Lois was disappointed would be an exercise in understatement. She was bitterly chagrined. All that was left was to return to Metropolis, which, after a tearful farewell to the twins, she did.

When she got back, the first thing she did was go to see Perry, "What a lousy break. The ship went down in a storm and took all of my evidence with it."

"Those are the breaks, darlin'. There are plenty of stories right around here that still need to be written."

They had been together for only a few days, but Lois had formed a lasting friendship with Suzanne and Collette and kept in touch with them via e-mail.

Time went on. Stories came and went.

Three months after the Congo trip, Lois busted a carjacking ring. By disguising herself as a boy she had infiltrated the gang and had gotten the evidence. After turning the evidence over to the MPD she had been there for the bust.

The day after turning in that story she had been feted by the staff. Everyone in the newsroom was gathered around her desk, coffee mugs lifted in salute. Lois complainingly said, "Come on, you guys, it was nothing, really."

One of her co-workers held up the latest edition of the Daily Planet. On the front page was a picture of Lois, dressed as a guy, performing interviews as the MPD arrested the car thieves. The headline was in bold 38 point type, ****Million Dollar Car Theft Ring Exposed.**** The by-line read, *by Lois Lane.*

Jimmy was in awe and it showed in his voice as he said, "I still can't believe they thought you were a boy."

Lois quipped, "The mustache helped. And thanks for teaching me how to boost a car."

Jimmy smiled and replied, "No problemo." He raised his coffee mug and said, "To Lois Lane ... still going where no reporter has gone before ..."

Perry, who had been standing off to one side, chided, "Don't encourage her, Jimmy. Her head's as big as the Metrodome as it is."

Lois replied to this sally by saying, "Nice to know I'm appreciated around here, Chief."

Perry riposted, "What do you expect? Garlands strewn at your feet?"

Lois kidded back, "No, but I'd like a raise."

As Perry replied he pulled out his pants pockets to show that they were empty. "Yeah? Well, I'd like a 145 foot triple masted schooner with a teak interior, but times are tough." Then he turned to Jimmy and asked, "By the way, where did you learn how to boost a car?"

Apology was written all over Lois's face as she looked at Jimmy. He grinned back at her and then replied to Perry, "One man's felony is another man's skill."

Perry looked around and then barked out, "Okay, what's everybody standing around for? This is a newspaper, not happy hour at Buckingham Palace." As everyone started to disperse back to their own work areas, Perry turned and headed for his office. Jimmy dogged his heels.

When they reached his office, Jimmy said, "Chief? I've got an angle on the mini-mall murders. I figure there was blood on the burritos because ..."

Perry cut him off, "Not now, Jimmy. I have an interview coming up. Did you finish those obituary updates?" Seeing Jimmy's sour look, Perry tried to encourage him, "Never underestimate the need for a good obituary." Perry moved around behind his desk.

As he did, snarkily, Jimmy replied, "I can think of one right now."

Perry didn't take the bait; he simply said, "I have an interview to prepare for. I'll talk to you later."

While that had been going on inside of the Daily Planet building, in the street just outside, a bus pulled to a stop at the corner to allow passengers to disembark. Among them was a young man carrying a somewhat battered suitcase.

Stepping off the bus he set his bag down and did a slow spin, taking in the sights, smells and sounds of Metropolis. Smiling to himself, he completed his turn as the bus pulled away. He started to reach for his bag, but as he did, he could hear tires screeching.

Looking around, he saw a municipal bus swerving from side to side and from lane to lane in the driver's attempt to avoid other vehicles. Along with the screech of the tires from the swerving, there were horns blaring and a thump, thump, as the driver repeatedly pounded on the brake pedal, which without resistance was going all the way to the floor.

Seeing the bus approaching a busy crosswalk, the young man decided that there was no way to avoid interceding, and stepping into the street, he braced himself with his hands outstretched. If the bus wasn't stopped innocent pedestrians would die and he realized he was the only one who could prevent that useless loss of life. It was a risk, but it was one he had to take.

Seconds later, the bus was stopped. The passengers were shaken up by the sudden stop, but otherwise unhurt. The pedestrians in the crosswalk, all but a single woman, were blissfully unaware of the danger they had been in, and she was so shocked at what she had seen that she was speechless.

As soon as the emergency brake was applied to the bus, the young man sprinted back to the sidewalk, picked up his bag, and merged into the pedestrian flow, effectively disappearing into the crowd. Checking his watch, he realized that if he didn't get a move on he was going to be late for his interview. Quickening his pace he headed for the Daily Planet.

As Jimmy was leaving Perry's office to go work on the obits, a detestable task at best, he decided to complete another chore instead. As he passed the elevator, there was a commotion beside it. A man who appeared to be either homeless or an escaped lunatic, dressed in a long ragged trench coat with an equally ragged filthy hat perched on his unwashed, unkempt hair, was shouting, at the top of his lungs, "Lois Lane!" Looking around, he finally spotted her. As he raced toward her desk, two security guards pursued him. He shouted, "It's going to explode! Here ..."

As he was saying this, he reached inside of his trench coat. Seeing him reach inside his coat and hearing what he said, someone put two and two together and yelled, "He has a bomb!"

Panic reigned in the newsroom as this was heard and a majority of staffers dropped to the floor.

Looking around in bewilderment, he slowly pulled out a brown paper wrapped packet from under his coat. He explained, "My name is Platt, Dr. Platt. It's my credentials!"

Unheeding, the guards grabbed him. In the scuffle that ensued, the packet fell to the floor, unnoticed.

One of the guards said, "We've had trouble with him before. The guy's a box short of a variety pack."

As the guards started to drag him away, he shouted, "You don't understand! Please! You have to believe me! The space program is doomed! The space station has been sabotaged! The Messenger is going to explode! Miss Lane! You must tell my story!"

The guards had an arm each as they hauled him to the elevator. He was more subdued as they waited. When the chime sounded to show that the elevator had arrived, they waited for the young man to exit before they stepped in with their prisoner.

The young man gave them a quizzical look as he passed, but then spotting Jimmy, he asked, "Where would I find Mr. White's office?"

Jimmy pointed and said, "Right over there. Good luck, you're gonna need it."

Giving him a surprised look, the man said, "Thanks, I think." "Don't mention it."

Lois heard what Platt was saying as he was led away. Lois's curiosity was piqued, and she watched as a secretary picked up the packet that he had dropped and dumped it into a trashcan. Nonchalantly, trying not to attract attention, Lois walked over, and stooped to pick up the packet out of the trash. Once it was in hand

she returned to her desk.

As she sat down, someone turned up the volume on one of the TV monitors that carried the news station. What she saw sparked even more interest in what she had retrieved from the trash. Platt had claimed that the transport vehicle, Messenger, would explode. On the TV screen was an image of the Messenger vehicle itself. Lois listened as the news reader read the report.

"The transport vehicle Messenger, piloted by Commander Jack Laderman and carrying the final propulsion module for Space Station Prometheus, is scheduled for lift-off Friday at 9 A.M.

Many hopes are riding on the success of this mission, especially in light of the failure of last week's unmanned launch."

The view shifted to a mock-up of the space station as the announcer continued.

"Space Station Prometheus, an international effort, is still lying in its low orbit, awaiting the arrival of the remaining modules, including the colonist habitation module scheduled to launch next week. Once all are in place, the Station will be lifted into permanent orbit."

The scene shifted again to a video tape recorded earlier. On screen were a number of white lab-coated scientists from Extra Planetary Research And Development (EPRAD), including Dr. Antoinette Baines, a beautiful physicist in her late thirties.

The announcer spoke over the video, "Dr. Toni Baines, Director of the Extra Planetary Research And Development agency, reminds us that timing is crucial. A series of delays and launch failures has put EPRAD's back to the wall."

The video shifted to an interview that had been done with Dr. Baines. In the video she said, "Unless all modules are in place within the next weeks, Space Station Prometheus will lose its orbit and fall back into Earth's atmosphere. That kind of occurrence would surely spell the end to any future projects and the space program as a whole."

Lois stopped watching the TV and spun back to her desk to examine Platt's credentials. As she did, she accidentally swept them off her desk onto the floor. As Lois slid from her chair to kneel on the floor to pick them up, she was confronted by a long pair of legs that ended in spike heels standing directly in front of her.

As she looked up to see the owner of the legs, she heard, "Morning, Lois. On your hands and knees again, I see. I thought that 'The Ice Queen' didn't do that kind of thing."

Lois was stung by this remark. She had never in her life done that with a man and she resented the implication. Looking up at Catherine Grant, Lois saw that she was wearing a dress so tight that it clung to every curve and so short that it barely covered her derriere, announcing to the world that she was all woman.

The best comeback she could come up with on short notice was, "Isn't it a little too early for you to be in, Cat? I thought ladies like you only worked nights."

Cat smiled and replied, "Part of my job as a society columnist ..."

Under her breath, Lois corrected her, "Oh, you mean mud-slinging rumor monger."

Cat continued without noticing Lois's comment. "... is to maintain an active social life. You remember what that's like ... or do you?" With that final barb, Cat leaned in and asked, "Who's the new tight end? Did you see him walk in?"

"No, I didn't notice. Now, I have work to do. Excuse me."

Dismissed, Cat spun on her spike heel and headed for her desk. Lois couldn't help noticing the stares Cat received from the males in the newsroom.

She muttered to herself, "What do men see in her, anyway? Don't they realize she's just looking for another notch on her garter belt?"

Jimmy was passing and overheard her. Shaking his head, he said, "Pathetic." Then thinking about what Lois had said, he

asked, “Have you actually seen this garter belt?”

Lois interrupted Herb by laughing. As she chortled she said, “Same old Cat. I actually miss those days. Now that she’s out on the west coast we don’t see each other that often.”

Clark commented too, “You know, she kept throwing herself at me even after I made it clear that I wasn’t interested, but I believe that underneath, she was a good person.”

“Yeah, she started to change after she met George. Remember the guy she brought in that night at the Planet? The night I was with Lex and we were invaded?”

“Yeah, I noticed the changes too. She stopped pursuing me all of the sudden.”

Changing the subject, Lois asked, “Herb, that was Clark coming in for his interview?”

“Yes, that indeed was Clark. He was there for his interview with Mr. White.”

Curious, Lois asked, “Did Perry turn him down the same way he did to my Clark?”

Herb thought for a second before answering, “Hmmm, well, not all things parallel across the universes. I guess I’ll have to explain ...”

Chapter 04

While Lois and Jimmy were speaking, the young man had knocked on Perry’s door. Perry, who hadn’t even looked up from the copy he was editing, beckoned him inside. Still without looking up, he indicated his visitor chair and mumbled something about having a seat. Clark set his portfolio on the floor next to the chair and sat.

All the time Perry was working on the copy in front of him, Clark could hear him complaining about someone named Ralph. Some of the expletives he used had Clark’s ears reddening.

Finally, after making a lot of marks on the copy, Perry sighed, put down his blue pencil, folded his hands in front of him and looked up. Apparently he had been so involved in editing Ralph’s copy that he had completely forgotten the interview, and when he looked and he saw a young man sitting in his guest chair, he remembered and flushed with embarrassment.

With a sheepish expression at having left the young man sitting there while he edited Ralph’s copy, Perry set it aside. He said, “Sorry to keep you waiting,” and picking up the folder with the job application in it, opened it and dithered as he perused the contents, not really seeing it. He was so embarrassed he couldn’t see straight and was trying to compose himself.

Lois had given the stranger only a passing glance because she was more interested in the packet of papers the visitor had dropped on the floor. She opened it and started going through it and her eyebrows quirked as she did. Her opinion of the ‘crazy’ man was revised. She decided that there could really be a story here and mulled over how best to approach Perry.

When Perry finally had settled himself, he set the folder aside and gave his visitor his attention. Clark arose, and leaning forward, held out his hand and said, “Mr. White, I really appreciate you taking the time to interview me.”

Perry said, “So, Mr. ...” Even as he said it, he realized that because he couldn’t remember this young man’s name, it was obvious that he hadn’t really been reading the material in the folder.

“Kent. Clark Kent.”

Again, Perry picked up a sheet of paper from the folder on his desk and actually started reading it this time. Once he finished, he said, “Yes. Kent. Oh, that’s right, Professor Carlton called me about you. Haven’t seen him in ... let’s see ... editor of the Smallville Press ... that’s in ...”

Clark supplied, “Kansas.”

The loud buzzing of the intercom interrupted them, and Perry looked at it in such a way as to indicate that it wouldn’t require much encouragement for him to pick it up and throw it across the room. Impatiently, he depressed a switch and listened.

“Composing needs the latest mock-up.”

Perry depressed the switch again and replied, “Well, tell him to keep his pants on, I’m in the middle of an interview. And where’s my lunch? If Carlini’s can’t deliver on time, find a place that can. Try Travaglini’s.” He released a sigh, placed two fingers alongside of his neck feeling for his pulse and looked at his watch as he said, as an aside to Clark, “I bought a blood pressure monitor last week, would you believe it? Hell, I’m only forty-nine.”

As an apparent non sequitur, Clark said, “Paava leaves.”

Confused, Perry said, “Excuse me?”

By way of explanation, Clark said, “The members of the Yolngu tribe in New Guinea eat Paava leaves to relieve stress ... puts them in a meditative state. Maybe you should try it.”

Giving him a wary eye, Perry replied, “Uh, huh. Sounds like you’ve done some traveling.”

Clark nodded and replied, “Some. I spent some time in a Llamasary in Tibet and with the Sherpas in Nepal. I just got back from Australia. I’ve been studying the Dreamtime theory in Aboriginal mythology. I’ve also spent time in some of the major world capitals,” in an obvious demonstration of just how facile his mind was, he started listing them, in alphabetical order, “Auckland, Berlin, Brazzaville, Cairo, Canberra, Geneva, Jakarta, Johannesburg, Katmandu, London, Moscow, Paris, Rome, Seoul, Tel-Aviv, Tokyo, -”

Interrupting his recitation, Perry commented, “Oh, a citizen of the world.”

Clark shook his head, as he proceeded to explain, “Not really. I’ve just traveled a lot. After I graduated from college I decided to broaden my horizons. This is my first time in Metropolis.” He picked up a portfolio of the type that is common to artists and writers and placed it in Perry’s hands. “I brought some samples of my work.”

Just then, before Perry had a chance to even open the portfolio, Lois came storming into Perry’s office. “Perry, that man wasn’t a kook.”

Perry gave her a strange look and bellowed, “Can’t you see I’m conducting an **interview** here? **How many times do I have to tell you to knock?**” Knowing how useless his remonstrance would be, he sighed as he placed the portfolio on the desk. When Lois didn’t move, in a calmer tone he performed the introductions, “Lois Lane, Clark Kent.”

Lois gave Clark no more than a glance, nodded to him, and then expectantly looked back at Perry. Her impatience was evident as she stood there staring at Perry.

For Clark’s part he looked at Lois and felt like he had been hit right between the eyes with a two by four. He could only with difficulty tear his eyes away from her. He was convinced that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever in his life laid his eyes on. He felt an immediate attraction. He had met many women in his travels. Most recently, the twins in the Brazzaville office had each tried to draw him into a sexual relationship. He had to admit that he had been attracted to them, but nothing like this. This was far beyond his previous experience. Lois Lane, no matter how this interview turned out, that was a name he was going to remember.

Perry noticed the fact that Kent was staring at Lois, and in an attempt to bring him back to his reason for being there, said, “Well, let’s take a look ...” Opening the portfolio, he looked at the first article and started reading. As he did, his eyebrows went up in disbelief and he read aloud, “The Borneo Gazette? ‘Mating Rituals of the Knob-Tailed Gecko?’”

As he read, Clark’s attention was drawn back to Perry.

Lois started. Hearing this triggered the memory of the time in

the Land Rover with Suzanne and Collette as they had driven to Point Noir and how they had laughed about a particular story and how they had gone on about the author. Lois realized that she hadn't given him much of a look so she took a curious look at the individual across the desk from Perry. This was Coquinos, tall, dark and handsome, just the way Suzanne and Colette had described him. She took a closer look and suddenly, her mouth went dry as it fell open. Mentally she chastised Suzanne and Colette for their understatement. She could see why they were attracted to him and each had tried to develop a relationship. Like them, now that she was looking at him, she could feel an immediate attraction, but she pushed it down. She didn't want to be attracted to anyone, not now, not ever. Attraction meant a relationship and relationships proceeded to marriage and then divorce and she didn't want that. Coquinos, no, Clark Kent, that was a name she was going to remember.

While she was staring at him literally in openmouthed wonder, she heard Perry in the background as he said, "Look, Kent, I'm sure these stories are fascinating, but this is the Daily Planet, the **greatest** newspaper in the world! Our people are dedicated servants of the fourth estate who deal routinely with matters of international significance."

The mood was broken when suddenly Jimmy barged into the office through the still open door. Lois stopped staring at Clark, and her head snapped around to look at Jimmy, as did Clark's and Perry's. Seeing that they were all looking at him, Jimmy stopped dead in his tracks and held up a set of keys. "I fixed the horn on your golf cart."

Perry bellowed, "**Not now!**"

Jimmy dropped the keys on Perry's desk and beat a hasty retreat.

Turning back to Clark he said, "As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, I just don't think that ... Look, Kent, you seem like an intelligent guy, but you can't just walk in here with this kind of portfolio and expect a job based on this kind of reporting. Hell, I've got PhDs in journalism **delivering** newspapers ..."

As a result of Jimmy's interruption, Lois managed to regain her equilibrium, and seeing that the interview was going downhill rapidly, she tried desperately to remember all that the twins had said about Coquinos, and remembered that he had written some good stuff while there on staff. She wanted desperately to help him get hired so she stepped to Perry's side and interrupted him by addressing Clark. "Clark, why did you put that first? Look, when you go for an interview you need to put your most important work up front so that it is the first thing seen." As she spoke, she flipped through the portfolio as if she knew what was there and was looking for something specific. "You want to impress the person you are interviewing with." She continued flipping through his folio and finally stopped when she found what she was looking for. In a chastising tone, she said, "Ah, I see what you've done, common mistake, you have it in chronological order. It's better with order of importance. Put the best first." As if pointing to the spot on a map where the treasure was buried, Lois put her finger on the page she had opened to and said, "Ah hah, there it is. There you go, Perry. *A Report on the Activities of the Rebels in Impfondo and along the Oubangui River.*" She looked at Clark and smiled as she said, "**That** should be the lead series!"

Clark and Perry both looked at her aghast. Clark asked, "How did you know about that?"

Lois looked at the baffled expressions on both men and started to laugh. She explained to Perry, "Clark was working in the Brazzaville office until shortly before I was there on the gunrunning story." In an aside, Lois said to Clark, "Suzanne et Collette envoient leurs salutations." {Suzanne and Collette send their regards.}

A look of understanding came over Clark's features as he said

in understanding, "Derek, Suzanne and Collette." Looking at Perry, he explained, "My desk was in the same office."

Lois smiled at Clark and said, "Suzanne and Collette couldn't say enough about you. They were still laughing about the Knob-Tailed Gecko story when I got there. They were all sorry that you had left."

Perry came out of his shock and asked, "Why didn't you say you had worked for the Daily Planet before?"

In a sincere tone, Clark replied, "I prefer to get a job on my own merits."

Perry's tone was completely changed as he held out his hand and said, "You worked for Derek Price in the Brazzaville office. That's good enough for me. Welcome to the Daily Planet, Clark Kent."

As they shook hands, Perry turned to Lois and said, "Since you seem to know Mr. Kent here, why don't the two of you work together, at least until he learns the ropes."

"But Perry, I always work alone, you know that."

"Not anymore you don't. Now, take him down to personnel and get him signed in."

"Can't Jimmy do that? I need to talk to you about a story."

"Okay, but, Kent, as soon as you are all signed in, report to Lois."

With a broad smile, he replied, "Sure thing, Mr. White."

Perry stopped him and said, "You're part of the family now. Call me Perry or Chief."

Smiling even broader, Clark replied, "Sure thing, Perry."

Perry bellowed, "**Jimmy!**"

Within seconds, Jimmy was at the door and Perry addressed him. "Jimmy, take Clark here down to personnel and get him signed in."

"Sure thing, Chief." As they walked out, Jimmy turned to Clark and held out his hand, which Clark took and shook while Jimmy introduced himself. "My name is Jimmy Olsen. I'm the gofer and part-time photographer."

Clark was smiling as he shook Jimmy's hand and replied, "Hi, Jimmy. Clark Kent. Pleased to meet you."

Herb stopped telling the story, and with a twinkle in his eye, said, "While Jimmy took Clark to personnel to complete the hiring process, Lois presented the paperwork that Dr. Platt had dropped. She convinced Perry that there was a story to investigate and she and Clark did that investigation. Everything in that investigation went the same way as yours, even Superman's debut, so you see some things remained the same. Shortly after that, though, things took a different course, yes, a different course indeed."

Lois was impatient to hear more and said, "Come on, Herb. Don't keep us in suspense. What changed?"

Looking at Lois, he smiled and said, "You won't have to wait much longer. But I need to back up a bit. Before the investigation, Clark called home ..."

That evening Clark called his parents.

"Well, Clark, it's good to hear from you. How are things?"

"Oh, they're just fine, Dad. Is Mom on the line?"

"Right here, honey."

"Hi, Mom. Well, I've got some good news."

"Okay, don't keep us in suspense, what is it?"

"I got a job."

"That's terrific, son. Where?"

"The Daily Planet."

"That's wonderful news, honey. Isn't that the paper you wanted to work for?"

"The very one. I almost didn't get the job, though."

Curious, Martha asked, "Oh, what happened?"

"My portfolio. I don't have it arranged properly. Luckily, Lois was there."

Hearing his tone of voice, Martha sensed something and a note of interest appeared in her voice as she asked, “Lois? Who is Lois?”

Clark tried to have a matter-of-fact tone to his voice, but failed miserably, “Lois is my new partner.”

“Okay, what happened?”

“I was interviewing with Perry, Mr. White, and he didn’t like my work ... until Lois flipped through my folio and showed him the articles I had written in Brazzaville.”

Jonathan asked, “How did she know about them?”

“She was in Brazzaville shortly after I left. She met Derek and the Black sisters. They told her about me. If not for her, I might not have gotten the job.”

Martha couldn’t help asking, “Well, what is she like?”

“Who?”

Martha pursued, “Lois, silly. What is she like?”

“What can I say ... she’s ... she’s beautiful and brilliant and driven to be the best. She has beautiful brown hair and a smile that’s like the sun on a bright day. Oh, and she doesn’t dress in the rather brazen way the Black sisters did. She is quite conservative in her dress.”

Martha placed her hand over the mouthpiece and mouthed to Jonathan, “He’s in love.”

Jonathan smiled his agreement and asked, “Do you think this partnership is going to work out?”

“I don’t know, she’s awfully bossy, but she does know what she is doing. We started working on a story this afternoon. Mom, how is your sewing machine working?”

“Fine, honey. What do you need?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Some kind of ... disguise, you know, like a Halloween costume, just not something fanciful like a ghost or vampire. There was an accident today. Lois and I were returning from lunch and -”

Martha interrupted, “You and Lois had lunch together?” There was a hint of laughter in her voice.

Hearing that, Clark was a little embarrassed and tried to get back on topic, “Yes, we had lunch together so we could discuss work. Anyhow, on the way back there was a gas explosion in the underground system. There was a life at stake so I ducked down another manhole and rescued the worker. My suit got dirty as a result. He also recognized me. I was able to deflect it by saying he must be in shock, but how many times can I do that? Lois saw that my suit was dirty and suggested I keep a change of clothes in a locker at the Planet, but I was thinking more along the lines of some kind of costume. Ideally it should be something I can wear under my regular clothes. I want some way that I can help out without it being obvious that it’s me. Do you know what I mean? In the past if I’ve been seen I’ve had to move on to another city. I don’t want to do that anymore. I think I want to stay here, in Metropolis.”

“I think I have an idea of what you want, honey. Why don’t you come for supper on Friday and we can see what we can come up with.”

“Okay, Mom. Thanks. I’ll see you guys on Friday.”

After they hung up, Martha burst out laughing. When she finally got herself under control, she said, “Definitely in love. After all this time of traveling and having no problem moving on if he was seen, suddenly he wants to settle down. This Lois must be something.” Her voice took on a more serious tone as she said, “I’m glad he has finally found someone. I hope we get to meet her soon.”

“Everything in its time, Martha. Everything in its time.”

Interrupting, Clark said, “Wow. I wish it had been that way for me. Perry almost didn’t hire me at all. Makes me wish that I had worked in the Brazzaville office.”

Lois quipped, “Why, because of the twins?”

Clark replied, “I’m sure they are very nice girls, but you know there is only one woman for me and that’s you. I presume that he was the same way from what Herb was saying.”

Lois smiled and said, “You got out of that one easily enough.”

Clark smiled and kissed her, then asked, “Herb, did you send him there?”

Herb replied, “I cannot take any credit for that. It was a decision that the other Clark made, but it did shortcut the process somewhat.”

Lois asked, “From what you said, it sounded as if she was attracted to him. I have to admit, there was an attraction on my part, but it scared me. I didn’t want to admit it, even to myself.”

Herb smirked and replied, “It is hard to tell and that is one question I failed to ask. I did infer that from future incidents.”

Lois blurted out, “Oh, you’ve talked to them?”

Nodding, Herb replied, “Oh, yes. We are quite good friends now.”

Clark asked, “Are they as happy together as we are?”

“Why don’t I finish telling the story and you can judge for yourselves.”

Lois was eager to hear more and it could be heard in the tone of her voice as she said, “Okay, so, don’t keep us in suspense. What happened next? Did she get involved with Lex Luthor?”

“Because of how things worked out, Luthor’s involvement in their lives was somewhat different. If you recall, the name of the company that was shipping the arms was L&M Enterprises, Inc. It was named after the principles who headed the company. The ‘L’ was of course, Lex Luthor. The ‘M’ was Miranda Michaels. They were in a relationship after he was divorced from Arianna Carlin.”

Lois and Clark both blurted out, “Miranda!”

They looked at each other and Clark said, “We were right! They did have a history before the pheromone incident. That was why she wanted revenge.”

Lois added, “They must have been together as a couple at the time and then he threw her over. That’s why she came after me. Luthor was after me and she resented it. She wanted him for herself.”

Clark asked, “How did that change Luthor’s involvement in our, uh, their lives?”

“Eventually the gunrunning and other things came to light and he went to jail. That didn’t happen right away, but eventually the team of Lane and Kent, to use your vernacular, got the goods on him.”

With some regret, Lois said, “I wish it had been that easy for us. All of the problems that Lex caused, we sure could have done without them.”

Herb chuckled and said, “Oh, another thing — Lois just had to gloat somewhat. As soon as she finished talking to Perry about the story, and before Clark returned from Personnel, she returned to her desk and brought up her email program. She sent an email to Suzanne and Collette.”

“TO: S.Black@DP.com ; C.Black@DP.com

FROM: L.Lane@DP.com

SUBJECT: Coquinos

Suzanne et Collette,

Très bonne nouvelle!

Perry White vient d'embaucher Coquinos.

Il va être mon partenaire.

Vous aviez raison, il est tellement beau.

Lois”

{Suzanne and Collette,

Wonderful news!

Perry White just hired Coquinos.

He is going to be my partner.

You were right, he is so handsome.

Lois}

Because of the time difference she didn’t receive their

responses until the following day.

“TO: L.Lane@DP.com
FROM: S.Black@DP.com
SUBJECT: RE: *Coquinos*
Lois,

C'est en effet de bonnes nouvelles, petite amie.

Nous sommes tellement heureux pour toi. Notre malheur est votre chance.

S'il vous plaît, lui présenter nos respects et lui dire que nous lui manquons.

Suzanne”

{Lois,

That is indeed good news, girlfriend.

We are so happy for you. Our misfortune is your good fortune.

Please give him our regards and tell him that we miss him.

Suzanne}

Chapter 05

Herb resumed, “Time went on.”

“After the Prometheus story, the Daily Planet was invaded by a horde of government agents that turned out to be as phony as a three pound note, uh, sorry, three dollar bill. It was a group that was out to get Superman and picked on the Daily Planet staff because they had been the first to report his presence and seemed to get most of the stories involving him.

“They seemed to disappear after they pushed Lois and Clark out of a plane and then fired a missile at Superman, which failed to harm him.”

“Superman was put through a series of tests by Lex Luthor. Lois was sent on a scavenger hunt which resulted in her finding a doll with an ‘S’ painted on his chest. After that, they looked for an invisible man and a gang of invisible crooks. They investigated the Metro Club and dealt with the Toasters and then some very smart children.”

“The Lane and Kent byline was becoming a household word.”

Shortly after the case of the smart children, Perry called Lois and Clark into his office. Once they were inside, Perry said to Clark, “Close the door, please.”

Clark closed the door and moved over to stand beside Lois, who sat in the visitor chair.

For a time, Perry simply sat there, smiling as he looked back and forth between the members of his star reporting team. Finally he addressed them, “Lois, you always worked alone until I teamed you up with Clark here. I have to say, in all modesty, that teaming the two of you up was one of my most brilliant moves in an already illustrious career. You haven’t let me down. I have to admit, at one point I was worried.” Looking directly at Lois he said, “I was worried because of the nickname ‘Mad Dog Lane’ that I started hearing. That all changed when I teamed you two up. You seemed to mellow, somewhat. I can only guess that Clark was a good influence on you. Right out of the starting blocks, your first story together, the Prometheus story, you two did a bang-up job. Lois, your exclusive on Superman’s debut was nothing short of spectacular. Finding and taking down that gang of invisible crooks was incredible. Breaking up the Metros and exposing their connection to the Toasters was outstanding work. Saving all of that gold in the depository from those invisible crooks, tremendous! Saving those kids from the effects of that drug ... exceptional. As a result of your outstanding work we want to make you an offer.”

Lois immediately jumped in, “Finally! A raise?”

“Well, no, darlin’, not exactly.” Perry was lost in thought for a brief time as he considered how best to approach the subject.

His long pause was trying Lois’s patience, and finally she asked, “Well, if it’s not a raise, what is it?”

Not knowing any other way to approach it than to just say it,

Perry started, “Well, the suits upstairs have decided to make some changes ...”

A feeling of dread came over Lois and she jumped to her feet and blurted out, “But I’m ...” glancing at Clark standing next to her, she thought better of her statement and changed it, “we’re the best reporters on staff! They can’t **do** that to us.”

Perry was taken aback and blurted out, “Do what?”

“Why, **fire us**, of course!”

“Who said anything about *firing* you?”

“Well, what else could they have in mind?” she said as she resumed her seat.

Perry smiled and said, “Something quite different. They have an opening upstairs that they want to fill -”

Lois cut him off, “I’m a reporter, not an administrator!”

“Yes, I couldn’t agree more. They aren’t looking to move **you** upstairs.”

She glanced at Clark and blurted out, “They don’t want to split us up, do they?”

Shaking his head, Perry said, “No they are most definitely **not** splitting you up.”

Lois was very confused at this point and looked at Clark as if asking if he could translate, so Clark stepped in and asked, “If they are not splitting us up, and if it’s not Lois, then who?”

Relief in his voice, Perry said, “Thank you, Kent. The voice of reason, **finally**. They want **me** to move upstairs. It would mean a raise in pay, regular hours, no overtime. Alice would love it. I’d be home for dinner every night. We could take vacation whenever we wanted to ...” his voice trailed off as he contemplated the opportunity.

As he drifted off in thought, Lois jumped in, “But if you move upstairs ... who would be Editor-in-Chief?”

Back on track, Perry smiled and said, “That’s precisely where you come in.”

Lois was staggered, “What? Me? Editor? I couldn’t, could I?” She finished in a small voice.

Perry’s smile broadened as he said, “It would only be temporary, until they recruit someone, or you prove yourself and they decide to make it permanent.”

“It’s such a big job. I don’t know.”

“That’s why I recommended that Clark be made your Associate Editor. You’ve proven how well you work together and he has editorial experience. Now, admittedly, it was with a weekly paper, but it is experience.” He gave them both a minute to let it all sink in before he asked, “Well, what do you think? Are you up for it?”

Lois and Clark looked at each other and there was a silent communication for a time.

Perry marveled at this. They had only been working together for a few months and yet they were able to communicate on a higher level than any other team of reporters he had ever come into contact with, even better than the legendary Norcross and Judd. They just seemed to think with one mind.

It was only a few seconds before Lois, not even taking her eyes off of Clark, spoke up, “Well, Chief, if you think we can handle it. I guess we can give it a try.”

Perry saw Clark nod his head in agreement.

Perry smiled and said, “Good. I knew I could count on you. Okay, now that that’s settled the moves will go into effect next week.”

Herb said, “It took some time to settle into their new roles, but within a very short time the newsroom was running very efficiently. Lois had quickly dominated the editor’s office and Clark’s role was very much diminished. Lois ran a very tight ship and as a result her nickname of ‘Mad Dog Lane’ was resurrected. Her style was not as laid back as Perry’s had been.”

“There were a number of occasions when Perry came down to

visit his old office and see how things were progressing. One thing that he found somewhat distressing was that Clark's role had been somewhat downgraded. Actually, more than somewhat degraded. He had become more of an Administrative Assistant than Associate Editor as Perry had envisioned."

"It was two months after the move to the Editor's office that the next incident occurred."

It was bright and early Wednesday morning and it had been a hard night. The number of calls for help seemed to be increasing the longer Superman had been around. This was the third night in a row that Clark had gotten little or no sleep. Admittedly, he could go on less sleep than an Earth human, but he still needed some sleep, occasionally, and he had only had a total of two hours in the previous three nights. That was insufficient, even for Superman, so he had fallen into a deep sleep literally as soon as his head had hit the pillow.

The sunlight streaming in through his window woke Clark up and in his groggy state it didn't immediately register that it was brighter than it should be at the time he was supposed to awaken. Finally, he looked at his clock and saw that it was flashing '12:00'.

He started up in bed, and grabbing his watch, he saw the actual time and exclaimed, "Oh no! I'm late!"

Since taking the appointment as Editor-in-Chief, Lois had made some changes. Since her time at the gym had been seriously curtailed she had gotten a stationary bike. In front of the bike was a TV tuned to the local news channel. While she exercised on the bike she was checking what stories her staff could follow up on.

After her time on the bike she went in and took a shower before dressing for work. As she did, she organized who was going to be assigned to each story. She smiled because today was going to have a perk added to it. Today she was going to deal with a particularly vexing personnel problem.

Lois dressed in a smart, conservative business suit with a pencil skirt that reached below the knee, a matching top, and stilettos with three inch heels. She chose to throw caution to the winds and not wear a blouse under the top, which gave her a plunging neckline that showed just the faintest hint of cleavage.

After a quick breakfast of cereal, she placed her bowl in the sink to wash later and left for work.

Realization hit Clark and he jumped out of bed, muttering, "Thank heaven for super-speed." He showered and dressed in seconds. Deciding that he didn't have time for breakfast, he simply ran out the door, planning to just grab a coffee on the way. He usually stopped and grabbed a coffee for both of them on his way in anyhow.

He left his apartment at a run and headed for the coffee shop. When he got there he saw a long line at the counter. With a look of despair he counted the number of people between him and the counter and decided that there was no way he would be able to get the coffees and make it to work on time. Just as he was about to leave, the barista, Mayson, spotted him at the back of the line and called, "Clark! Hey!"

He saw her leaning to the side so that he could see her and ran up to the counter. As she offered two cups to him she said, "Here ya go, your regular lattes!"

As he threw some bills on the counter, he accepted them and said, "Thank you. You have literally saved my life. Thank you." As he turned away he reiterated, "Thank you."

He didn't see the look she gave him as he headed for the door.

Bolting from the door he looked like a running back doing a broken field dash to the end zone dodging tacklers as he headed for the Daily Planet building. The tacklers he was dodging, however, were cars, and he was dodging in and out of bumper-to-bumper rush-hour traffic to the sound of car horns blaring instead

of a cheering crowd.

Carrying the two lattes he swung through the revolving door and charged across the lobby, squeezing through the doors to the elevator as they were closing. He bumped the doors and they bounced open again as he stumbled into another passenger. Fortunately the doors were not dented by hitting him.

He asked, "Are you all right?"

The other passenger replied, "Yeah, you?"

"Yeah, I'm all right."

When the doors opened onto the newsroom floor he breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't hear Lois's heartbeat so he knew that he was there first. As he descended the ramp, he heard Jimmy say, "You're cutting it awfully close."

Spinning to address Jimmy, as he started down the ramp, Clark replied, "One of those mornings." As he spun back around he crashed into a delivery boy, spilling the contents of one of the lattes all over his shirt. It was all Clark could do not to shout an expletive. He heard Ralph shout, "Rub some dirt on it."

Realizing that he didn't have the time to go home to change, even at super-speed and especially since a majority in the newsroom had witnessed his mishap, he approached Steve, the travel writer and said, "Steve, I need the shirt off your back, literally."

Steve looked at him like he had lost his mind and said, "You're kidding, right?"

Clark's tone told Steve that he wasn't kidding as he said, "Metropolis Metros, Gotham Growlers, this Tuesday, two company seats, forty yard line, behind the bench, for your shirt. You have five seconds to decide, five, four, three, two, one."

Meanwhile, Lois had arrived and was about to enter the elevator, headed up to the newsroom.

When the chime of the elevator sounded, the first person that caught a glimpse of Lois on board immediately dropped into her chair and looked like she was busily working. What she was doing was sending an IM to all of the staff, "Mad Dog is here." That started a wave that spread out from that epicenter and everyone put down coffee cups or magazines and picked up phones of attacked their keyboards when that message popped up.

Seeing the staff hard at work, Lois smiled in satisfaction as she headed for her office. She was still planning her day and didn't think anything of the flurry of activity around her.

Clark was just finishing re-tying his tie as he heard her heartbeat and the clip, clip, clip of her heels as she approached the office.

With a sigh of relief he stepped away from the mirror and picking up the still full latte cup said, "Good morning, boss," tongue-in-cheek as she walked in.

She handed him her camel colored bag and took the latte from his hand as he said, "You have a meeting in the conference room in thirty minutes."

"Yes, the story assignments, I know."

As she stepped around behind her desk, he said, "There's a senior staff meeting at nine."

"Did you call, oh, what's her name? The freelancer, the one with the story about the mayor?"

"Janice, yes. I told her that she needs solid evidence or we can't run the story. Oh, and your immigration lawyer called. He said that it is imperative -"

She interrupted him and as she spun around to face her computer said, "Push the senior staff meeting to tomorrow and keep the lawyer on the schedule." She picked up the latte cup and was about to drink when she saw writing on the cup. As he turned away to comply, she spun her chair around again, stopped him and asked, "Uh, who's Mayson and why does she want me to call her?"

Surprised at this turn of events, Clark sheepishly admitted, “Uh, well, she’s a girl that I know. She’s working as a barista, working her way through ... Law School. That was originally my cup.”

Looking at the cup suspiciously, Lois asked, “And I’m drinking your coffee why?”

“Because your coffee spilled.”

Lois nodded and lifting the cup to her lips, took a sip. Then looking at Clark she said, “So, you drink low fat, unsweetened, mocha latte.”

Nodding, he said, “I do. I love the chocolaty goodness.”

“Is that a coincidence?”

“Yeah; isn’t that incredible?” His phone started to ring. As he moved to answer, he said, “I mean, it is. I ... I ... I wouldn’t possibly drink the same coffee as you just in case yours spilled, that would be ... pathetic.” Answering the phone, he said, “Ms. Lane’s office. ... Oh, hey Claude.” Looking at her she gave a hand signal and he said, “She wants to see you. Can you come to her office right now? ... Okay. See you in a minute.”

After he hung up, he asked, “Why do you want to see Claude?”

She didn’t answer his question.

He asked, “Did you read that story I turned in?”

“Clark, you aren’t a reporter anymore.”

“I know, but it’s a good story.”

“It was okay in a touchy feely way and I do think that you drink the same coffee as me just in case you spill one which is ... in fact ... pathetic.” Picking up her phone, Lois dialed a number. When it was answered, she said, “This is Lois Lane, I want Claude Rochert’s account locked out. Change the password and send it to me. I’ll be reviewing his files. Thanks.” She hung the phone up.

Because of his super-hearing, Clark had heard this and knew that what was about to happen would not be pretty, but he decided to pretend he had not, so he returned to the former topic, “Or impressive.”

“I’m impressed you didn’t spill it in the first place. Now when Claude arrives, you’re window dressing.”

“I won’t say a word.”

Claude swaggered in.

Lois nodded to Clark, indicating that he should close the door.

Claude noticed this and looked around before he said, “You wanted to zee moi?”

“Yes, Claude. You are being transferred. I know that you didn’t request it, but you are being transferred anyhow. I’ve made arrangements for you to be assigned to the Brazzaville office. You’ll feel right at home. They all speak French there. Oh, and I’ve already warned the staff to make sure they keep their story notes locked up. You report there in two weeks. You can take the time between now and then to pack and travel. You can start by packing your personal items in your desk, now.” Glancing at her watch, she said, “I have a story meeting to attend.” She edged around him and out the door with Clark following close behind.

Over her shoulder she said to Clark, “Watch my six.”

Glancing over his shoulder he saw that Claude was pacing the office, red-faced with anger. As he headed for the door Clark said, “Here he comes.”

She muttered, “Don’t do it, Claude, don’t do it. I’m transferring you, don’t make me fire you.”

Bursting out of the office, Claude shouted, “You poisonous bi*h! You can’t transfer me! Y ... you don’t think I can see what you’re doing here. You’re getting back at me because I exposed you as the Ice Queen you really are. So appropriate, the Ice Queen from Canada ... **French** Canada!” In his anger he switched to his native French which Lois understood perfectly, “Vous me transférez parce que vous sentez menacé par moi ... et ... **vous** êtes un **monster!**” {Translation — You are transferring me because you feel threatened by me ... and...**you** are a **monster!**}

Lois muttered, just loud enough for him to hear, “Claude, aret.” {Translation — Claude, stop.}

That only fueled his anger and he switched back to English so that the entire office would understand, “Just because you have no semblance of a life outside of this office you think you can treat all of us like your own personal slaves.” He paused to take a breath before he continued, “You know what, I feel zorry for you. Because you know what you are going to ‘ave on your deathbed? **Nosing** and no **one**.”

Lois slowly turned to face Claude and in a calm tone, replied, “Listen carefully, Claude. I’m not transferring you because I feel threatened by you. I’m transferring you because you are lazy and incompetent. You don’t go to the trouble of doing your own work. You would rather spend your time seducing the women in the office and stealing stories than doing the actual work yourself. Now, one more word out of you and instead of transferring you, Clark here will have you thrown out on your ass.”

He was taking a deep breath to shout a reply when she cut him off and said, “Another word and I’ll have Clark call security and have you escorted from the building while Jimmy takes pictures. I suppose it would be appropriate for the business section. Is that what you want?” She didn’t even give him time to decide before she said, “I didn’t think so.” As she turned her back to him, she said, “I have work to do.”

As they were walking away, Claude slunk back to his desk and Lois said to Clark, “I’ll need you around this weekend to go over his files to see if he was actually doing any reporting and if so what needs to be followed up on.”

Clark was shocked and blurted out, “This weekend?”

She turned on him and asked, “You have a problem with that?”

Clark decided not to fight it, “No, it’s just my parent’s anniversary and the Corn Festival. I ... I was going to go home and ...it’s fine ... I’ll cancel. You’re actually saving me from a weekend of misery anyway.” By this point, Lois was long gone and he finished, lamely, “Good talking to you. Yeah.”

A little later, Clark was on the phone, “Mom, I’m really sorry. What can I tell you, she’s making me work the weekend?”

“Couldn’t you just fly out for a while?”

“No, Mom, no. Look, I’ve worked too hard for this promotion.”

“Honey, is this job really worth it?”

“I’m sure you and Dad are disappointed, and I am too, but,” he could hear Lois’s heartbeat as she approached the office and changed what he was saying, “Yes, we appreciate the tip, but without hard evidence to back it up, we’d be no better than the Whisperer. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.” Shaking his head, Clark hung the phone up.

Lois stepped up to him and asked, “That your family?”

Almost reluctantly, he admitted, “Yes.”

She asked, “They tell you to quit?”

Shaking his head again, he said, “Every single day,” and reached for the ringing phone. “Lois Lane’s office. ... Yeah. ... Okay.” He hung the phone up. Turning to Lois he said, “Edwards and Johnson want to see you upstairs, immediately.”

Lois sighed and growled in frustration before she said, “Okay, come get me in ten minutes. We’ve got a lot to do.”

“Okey doke.”

She turned and left the office, headed for the elevator.

Clark interrupted Herb and asked, “Herb, how did that happen? He was supposed to be an associate editor, not a glorified administrative assistant.”

Herb said, “The same thing happened to them that happened to you and Lois some time ago, when she was appointed acting Editor-in-Chief. The lure of power. They started off almost equal, but slowly, Lois assumed the dominant role in the office and

Clark, being who he invariably is, allowed her to take the lead. That is not to say that he liked it, but as long as he was near her, he didn't care what his role was."

Lois commented, "Poor, Clark. I feel sorry for him. I know how it was with us at that time. I was mean to Clark and ... and it almost cost him his life. We were married at the time. I can just imagine how it would have been if that had happened before we were married. What about Clark's parents? How did they handle it?"

"They knew that Clark was in love with Lois even before he did. They could tell by the way he talked about her. They were supportive, but they did ask if he was sure that this was the correct path to take. They knew that ultimately the final decision was up to Clark. All they could do was love and support him in his decision."

Lois smiled and said, "At least some things never change. Martha and Jonathan are the solid rock foundation that Clark was built on. He wouldn't be who he is today, if not for them. I love them to pieces."

Clark smiled and said, "They love you too, honey."

Lois turned back to Herb and asked, "Okay, so what happened next?"

Chapter 06

As Lois left the elevator she marched to the publisher's office. She was so focused on what she still needed to do to wrap up Claude's transfer that she didn't even hear Brenda, the receptionist, when she said, in a cheery tone, "Good morning, Ms. Lane" as Lois passed.

Single-mindedly, Lois ignored her and marched straight for the door.

As Lois entered the office, she greeted the two individuals that occupied it, "Mr. Edwards, Mr. Johnson."

Mr. Edwards, a bespectacled older man with thinning, graying hair, a florid complexion and a rather round face greeted her, "Lois, you are really doing a great job as Editor-in-chief."

She approached and stood behind the visitor's chair, but rather than sitting in it, she placed a hand on the back as she said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you. This isn't about a raise, is it?"

"Actually, no, it isn't. We received a call in reference to your application for permanent residency."

"Oh, they are finally ready to grant that? Wait a minute, why did they call you?"

Mr. Johnson, junior to Mr. Edwards by some years, but balding nonetheless spoke up, "We also just spoke with your immigration attorney, who followed up our discussion with the fax that Edwin is holding."

"Oh, then we're good?"

Mr. Edwards replied, "Lois ... no, not really. Your application has been denied. It appears that there is a small problem. According to the INS you were told that you couldn't travel out of the country."

"That is correct." She gasped, remembering the Congo trip. "Oh, no."

Mr. Edwards replied, "Oh, no is right. You went to the Congo."

The strain was evident in her voice as she defended herself, "But that had the potential to be a Pulitzer Prize winning story."

In a matter-of-fact tone, he replied, "But it wasn't, was it? It was a dud. Because of that you are now being ... deported."

Stunned, she almost shouted, "Deported?"

Looking at a fax he had in his hands, Mr. Edwards said, "There were also some forms you failed to fill out in time."

Lois was becoming frantic. She knew that she was where she wanted to be and wanted to stay. "Come on. Come on. It's not like I'm even an immigrant, I'm from Canada for God's sake. My parents were both Americans. There's got to be something we can

do."

Mr. Johnson pointed out, "Your parents both gave up their U.S. citizenship before you were born and that made you a Canadian citizen. We can reapply, but you will have to leave the country for at least a year."

Desperately looking for an answer, Lois said, "Okay. Okay. It's not ideal, but with video conferencing, email, fax and internet, I can handle things from Montreal."

The tone of Mr. Johnson's voice told her that he wished it were otherwise as he said, "Unfortunately, if you are deported you cannot work for an American company."

Mr. Edwards said, "Until this is resolved, I'm going to make Claude Rochert Editor-in-chief."

Stunned, Lois spluttered out, "Claude? Claude Rochert? The guy I just transferred to Brazzaville. You're going to make him Editor-in-chief?"

Mr. Edwards was surprised and challenged, "When was he transferred to Brazzaville? I hadn't been notified of his transfer."

Sheepishly, Lois admitted, "I ... uh, I just did it, forty-five minutes ago. He's packing his personal belongings even as we speak."

Mr. Edwards stated, "We need an editor and he is senior."

Lois was shocked. She had finally been able to remove that problem from the newsroom and here they were planning to make it even worse. "You cannot be serious. I beg of you ..."

Mr. Edwards replied, "Lois, we are desperate to have you stay. If there was any way, any way at all we could make this work, we'd be doing it."

Lois stuttered, "There has to be a way ... I ... I am begging ..."

Time was almost up. Clark was in the elevator, on his way upstairs to extricate Lois from her meeting. Fortunately a call had come in that gave him a good reason and he wouldn't have to invent a lie. He was grateful for that since he was such a terrible liar. That call from composing couldn't have been more opportune. During the ride up in the elevator he could hear Lois's heartbeat and it was beating a wild tattoo. Something was going on and he could tell that she was upset. Actually, upset was too mild a term, she was becoming frantic. It reminded him of when he had found her in the compartment on Prometheus confronting the bomb. As soon as the elevator doors were open he was in motion. He needed to rescue her once again.

Brenda tried to stop him, "Mr. Kent, they are in a meeting."

He brushed by her with an, "I know, but this can't wait."

Lois was continuing to plead with them when suddenly there was a knock on the door and then the door opened. Clark leaned in so that his head and shoulders were inside the room and said, "Lois ..."

Mr. Edwards stopped him and snapped, "We're in a meeting."

Looking at him, Clark said, "Sorry to interrupt, but this is important."

Lois was reaching the end of her patience, and forgetting for the moment that she had asked him to come get her out of the meeting, she turned on him and asked in a frazzled tone, "What?"

Clark, being loyal to Lois and trying to do what she asked, said, "Sam, from composing, is on the line. He says the front page is on hold. He says he has to speak to you right away. I told him you were otherwise engaged, but he insisted, so ..."

Lois had been looking at him, over her shoulder, this entire time with a worried expression. Suddenly what he said registered and one word struck a responsive chord. Suddenly that single word became a lifeline and like a drowning person she reached for it in desperation. As the import of that word impinged on her consciousness with lightning-like rapidity, a plan began to form in her mind, and as it did the pieces of her life which had just been shattered by this problem suddenly started to reassemble

themselves. She looked at him with an expression that changed from near anger to almost hope as the plan took shape.

He was frozen in place, still half in and half outside of the office, when he saw her expression change, and curious as the source of the change he asked, “What?”

Her facial expressions were changing with the rapidity of a strobe light. Her expression became one of sly mystery, worry, joy and finally apprehension as she looked back and forth between Mr. Edwards and Clark. She was hoping that this germ of a plan would work. It would all depend on Clark. If he went along with it, everything would be fine. If he didn’t her life would be ruined. She hoped that Clark would be willing to go along with it. It would be a sacrifice on his part, a big sacrifice.

The longer this silence went on the more apprehensive Clark became. Her heartbeat had suddenly changed, again. For a few seconds there it had calmed and then it sped up again, but the rate and rhythm had changed. He was mystified as to what it all meant.

The plan was almost fully formed as she played for time. She uttered, “Uh,” and looking over her shoulder at Clark and catching his attention, mouthed, “Come here.”

He looked at her questioningly and she repeated it, mouthing more emphatically, “Come here,” and nodding her head at a spot next to her.

Finally, Clark took the hint and stepping completely inside the office allowed the door to close behind him. He stood there for several seconds, undecided.

As he hesitantly took a couple of paces into the room behind her, she addressed Mr. Edwards and Mr. Johnson, “Gentlemen, I understand. I understand the predicament that you are in. And, uh, and there’s uh, “ she stepped back so that she was standing next to Clark as she spoke, “and there is something that you should know.” Gesturing with her hands, Lois indicated herself and Clark, actually touching his tie, which was a wild multi-colored print, as she said, “We’re, uh, we’re getting married.”

Clark was stunned, and when she touched his tie he was distracted and looked down, as she patted his stomach and repeated, “We are getting married.”

Clark stuttered out, “Who ... who is getting ... married?”

Lois was smiling as she replied, “You and I.”

Clark looked baffled as he repeated, “Who?”

With more confidence, Lois responded, “You and I. You and I are getting married.”

Looking up, Clark was in shock and he repeated, “We are ...”

Lois supplied, “Getting married.”

Mr. Johnson asked, “Isn’t he your secretary?”

“Assistant ... assistant editor. Titles, but it wouldn’t be the first time one of us fell for our assistant, right Jack?”

Mr. Edwards gave Mr. Johnson a look because that was what had happened with him.

Lois continued, “So, yeah, the truth is ... Clark and I ... we are just two people that just weren’t meant to fall in love, but we did. It all started when we were teamed up as reporters. All of those late nights at the office, the all night stakeouts, evenings of takeout going over story notes.”

Clark was dumbfounded, unable to move, shocked at this turn of events. Everything that Lois was saying was true. They had spent a lot of time together on stake outs and such so it was easy to believe that everything she was saying could be true. In some ways this was his dream coming true. He had fallen for Lois when she had stormed into Perry’s office during his interview. He had hoped that someday, some way they would actually start to date and perhaps become a couple and then engaged then married and start a family. Now suddenly, here she was saying that they were getting married. It was too good to be true and all he could do was to go along for the ride.

Lois still appeared to be uncomfortable, but she did put her arm around his shoulder and started to babble, “You just can’t ...

can’t fight a love like ours. So, uh ... uh ... are ... are we good with this? Are you happy, because we,” she started motioning between herself and Clark with her hands, “because we are ... happy. We are happy, so happy.”

The entire time Lois spoke, Clark was standing there with a dumbfounded expression on his face. He was virtually in shock. He didn’t know why this was happening or exactly what was happening, but he was happy that it was happening.

Mr. Edwards sat back in his chair with a pleased look on his face. He said, in a relieved tone, “I love it.” Bringing up his left hand and pointing to his ring finger he said, “Just make it legal.”

Lois looked confused for a second and then realized the allusion, and lifting her own left hand, she pointed at her ring finger and said, “Oh, yeah, right,” and nodded her agreement.

Clark was still totally confused; it was all happening too fast for him to keep up. He did love Lois. He had since the day of his interview and he did harbor the hopes of a permanent relationship with her, but not this way. While he was mulling this over, Lois grabbed his arm and started to drag him out of the office.

As she did she said, “I guess we need to get down to the immigration office and get that little thing straightened out. Come on, Clark.”

Mr. Edwards said, “Okay, since Claude is being transferred and this will be temporary, I think that Perry would be willing to return to the Editor’s office until you get this all straightened out. I’ll talk to him. Starting tomorrow and until this is resolved, both of you will return to reporter status.”

The only thing that works faster than a telegraph is the office grapevine. Apparently the receptionist had been listening in and she immediately sent an instant message to the staff announcing that Lois and Clark were getting married.

That message started popping up on terminals even before they exited the elevator.

As they passed by the various desks on the way to the office, Lois was focused on what had to be done, but Clark was looking around. The comments he received varied, but were mostly by way of incredulous disbelief. Most of the staff still remembered Claude’s stories about Lois and her nickname of Ice Queen, especially since Claude had used it only about an hour ago. They had all seen how Lois had taken over the editor’s office and diminished Clark’s role. Most actually couldn’t believe the story and assumed that somehow Lois had bulldozed Clark into it and they felt sorry for him.

Exiting the elevator, they made their way back to the editor’s office. Once there, Lois called composing and settled the problem that had come up. Then she picked up a story submission, and grabbing a blue pencil, started to edit the copy. Seeing him standing in front of her desk, she became somewhat uncomfortable and asked, “What?”

Clark was still dazed from all that had been happening and was simply standing there, in front of her desk. He asked, “I don’t understand what’s happened. What just happened in there? Why are we getting married?”

“Relax, there’s nothing to it.”

“Do explain.”

“They were going to make Claude the editor.”

“And because of that we have to get married?”

Putting down her blue pencil and giving Clark her full attention, Lois said, “What’s the problem? It isn’t like you were saving yourself for someone special.”

“I like to think that I was, and besides, it’s illegal.”

She smirked and replied, “They’re looking for terrorists, not newspaper editors.”

“Lois.”

“Yes?”

"I'm not going to marry you, at least not this way."

"Sure you are, because if you don't, your dream of touching millions of people with the written word would have disappeared like so much steam." Lois folded her hands over the copy she had been working on. "If I had been deported and they promoted Claude, I can guarantee he would have fired you immediately because you were associated with me." His phone started to ring. "Don't worry, as soon as the proper amount of time has passed, we'll get a quickie divorce and no one will be the wiser. But until then, like it or not, your wagon ... is hitched ... to mine." She pointed at his desk and said, "Telephone," as she went back to editing the copy.

After lunch they appeared at the Immigration and Naturalization office together. When they entered they found a line practically all the way to the door. Lois despaired of being able to deliver her documents and return to the office anytime soon, until she saw the individual at the front finish. She hustled to the front of the line and butted in, looking apologetically at the next person, who looked to be of Asian descent.

The man at the counter looked at her with annoyance, but she pressed ahead and placing the folder on his desk, said, "Please, file this fiancée visa."

He opened the folder and saw the name. Saying, "Come with me," he picked up the folder and led them to an office. He left them there and returned to his counter.

They waited for a period of time. Lois was standing near the door and she had a printout of a submission that she was reading. While they were waiting, Clark muttered, "I have a bad feeling about this."

Finally there was a knock on the door. This was done because Lois was standing in front of it, blocking it from opening. She moved aside and the gentleman came in. As he moved behind his desk he apologized, "Sorry about the wait." He shrugged, "Crazy day today," and sat down. "My name is Ramsbottom, Nelson Ramsbottom, I'm your immigration investigator." Mr. Ramsbottom was a feisty though smallish man that reminded Clark of a bantam rooster that they used to have on the farm. His quick movements and his posture resembled that strutting rooster. The similarity was so pronounced that Clark almost laughed, but he did manage to contain himself, barely.

Lois tried to be ingratiating, "Of course, of course, we understand, and I can't tell you how much we appreciate you seeing us on such short notice."

Picking up the folder he glanced at the contents. Laying it down before him, he placed his hands on it, looked back and forth between them, and then centering his gaze on Clark, he said, "So, you're getting married. I just have one question: are you committing fraud so that Lois will not be deported and she can keep her position as Editor-in-chief of the Daily Planet?"

Startled by this question, Clark sat forward in his chair and stammered, "Uhm, where ... where did you hear that?"

Lois asked, somewhat defensively, "Why ever would you think that?"

"We had a phone tip this afternoon from a man named," he looked down at the papers.

Lois asked, "Would it by any chance be Claude Rochert?"

He looked up, nodded and confirmed, in a surprised tone, "Claude Rochert."

Lois continued and said, "Claude, poor Claude. I'm ... I'm so sorry, Claude is nothing, but a ... a disgruntled former employee that is trying to strike back at me with these obviously unfounded claims and I apologize. We know that you are incredibly busy with a roomful of gardeners and delivery boys to attend to. If you just give us our next step we'll be out of your hair and on our way."

Clark was more than a little bit disappointed in Lois's attitude and was feeling quite uncomfortable.

Mr. Ramsbottom indicated the chair next to Clark and said, "Ms. Lane, please," inviting her to sit in the chair next to Clark.

As she sat, he said, "Uh, let me explain the process that is about to unfold. Step one will be a scheduled interview. I'll put you each in a room and I will ask you every little question that two people in love would know about each other. In step two I dig deeper. I look at your phone records, talk to your neighbors. I interview your coworkers. If your answers don't match up at every point," he pointed at Lois and said, "You will be deported indefinitely," he pointed at Clark and said, "and you, young man, will have committed a felony punishable by a two-hundred and fifty thousand dollar fine and five years in **federal** ... prison."

As Mr. Ramsbottom was finishing speaking, Clark was distracted by seeing a woman being hauled away by a couple of armed guards.

"Oh, you see, well, Clark, what do you have to say for yourself? Talk to me."

Clark was in a quandary. This had the potential of being illegal, but since his dearest wish was that he could be married to Lois, this was actually going to be legitimate. As he weighed the pros and cons of the issue, he first nodded, then shook his head. Finally he decided that perhaps, just perhaps, he could use this situation to right a wrong.

When he nodded his head, Mr. Ramsbottom said, "Yes," but when he shook it he said, "No," but then he nodded again.

Clark finally said, "Well, you see, it's this way. Mr. Ramsbottom, Lois and I are just two people ... that shouldn't have fallen in love, but we did. We kept it secret, because we felt it would be deeply inappropriate to announce that I was being made an editor with equal, shared authority, over the newsroom if it were known that we were involved. I've loved Lois from the moment I saw her. It just took her a little longer to realize that she loved me as well."

"Oh, that's the way it is, huh?" He turned to Lois and asked, "Have you told your parents about this, that you're getting married?"

Lois's answer was quick, "No, not yet, you see my parents are divorced. My dad is out in Edmonton. The last I heard my mom was in a rehab program. My little sister is away at university."

Turning to Clark he asked the same question, "Have you told your parents yet?"

Lois surprised Clark when she answered for him. He had had no idea that she had even been listening to him when they had talked about the weekend earlier, but obviously she had heard and remembered every word he had said. "We were going to tell them this weekend. It's their anniversary. We thought it would be a nice surprise."

Since Lois had been talking, Mr. Ramsbottom directed his follow-up question to her, "Oh, so you're flying out there this weekend? Where is that?"

Lois, realizing that she may have overplayed her hand, shifted the ball to Clark's court, "Why am I doing all the talking, it's your parents' house. Clark, jump in there."

Clark nodded and said, "Smallville."

Mr. Ramsbottom smirked and said in disbelief, "Smallville? You've got to be making that up."

"No, Smallville was named after Jeremiah Small, the first settler in the area."

Still skeptical, Mr. Ramsbottom asked, "What area is that?"

Clark's answer was simple and straightforward, "Lowell County, Kansas."

"So ... you're from Smallville, Kansas?"

"Yes, Smallville, Kansas, home of the Corn Festival. That is also happening this weekend. All of my friends and former schoolmates will be there. I've been looking forward to seeing them." As an afterthought, he added, "And introducing them to my fiancée."

“Okay, fine. I see how this is going to go.” He started writing on a post it note. “I’ll see you both at 11:00 o’clock Monday morning for your scheduled interview. I must say I’m looking forward to this one.” He pulled the post-it off and handed it to Clark, who accepted it and ushered Lois from the office.

Clark commented, “So that was Tempus’s ploy, to have her deported so they wouldn’t get together.”

“Yes, my boy, however, it didn’t happen as quickly as Tempus had planned, and when it did come, he had not counted on Lois’s resourcefulness.”

Lois interrupted Herb again, “Why did Clark go along with it? He’s mister law and order! I can’t believe that he would do something like that.”

Herb replied, “As Clark explained it to me, he hoped that it wouldn’t come to that. He was already in love with Lois, and had been from the first minute. He hoped that by going through with the marriage that she would actually see him for who he is and fall in love with him and then it wouldn’t be a ‘fake’ marriage. He already wanted to have a life with her, and he was hoping that perhaps, subconsciously, she had come up with this idea and had chosen him because there were some feelings for him there on her part.”

Clark said, “Seems awfully risky to me.”

“I’ll tell you a little secret. They weren’t saying these things to each other, but Lois had been attracted to him from the start. Right from that first minute in Perry’s office, but she wasn’t admitting it, even to herself. She had lived through the divorce of her parents and was afraid of making that kind of commitment and having the same thing happen to her. She was protecting herself. As it turned out, that was why she chose him. Yes, it was desperation and yes, it was spur of the moment, but if it hadn’t been him and but for her subconscious desire to be with him, she might not have acted on her impulse. Also, by thinking of it as a fake marriage, when it ended in divorce, as she was convinced it would, then there would be no problem because it hadn’t been a real marriage in the first place.”

Chapter 07

As they exited the INS building onto the sidewalk, Lois was digging into her bag for her day-timer. Once she had it in hand, she stopped walking and started giving orders, “Okay, so we will go out to Smallville. Smallville? Really?” At his nod she finished, “Okay, Smallville. We will pretend we are boyfriend and girlfriend, and we’ll tell your parents we are engaged. You can make the plane reservations, use the frequent flier miles for the tickets, and book through the travel office. I suppose I can pop for first class for you. Request a vegan meal and make sure they give it to me. The last time they actually gave it to a vegan and I wound up eating this wilted salad with some yucky green stuff...” She looked up from the notes she was making and noticed that he was walking away from her, and called to him, “Why aren’t you taking notes?”

Turning to face her, his face was a mask. He was holding his emotions firmly in check as he replied, “Excuse me, Lois, but weren’t you in that meeting?”

“What, what?” Suddenly his meaning came through and she said, “Oh, oh. The thing you said about being promoted! Genius. Genius. You completely fooled him.”

“I was completely serious. I’m looking at possibly a two-hundred and fifty thousand dollar fine and five years in jail. That changes things.”

Lois looked at him and said, “Promote you to editor? Share it with you? No.”

He looked at her in disbelief. He said, “That was what Perry intended originally, but then you just took over. Well, I’ve got news for you. That’s the way it’s gonna be. If not, then I quit and

you’re screwed.” As he turned away, he said, sarcastically, “Bye, bye, Lois. It really has been a little slice of heaven.” Even as he turned away he was hoping that she would give in. It would be an indication that she could learn to be flexible.

As he turned away, Lois started to panic and called out, “Clark! Clark! Okay, fine. We will *share* the office.” She said grudgingly, “We will share the responsibilities of editor. If you do the Kansas trip and the immigration interview, I will make you the *associate* editor.”

Clark decided that now that she had caved in to his demands, it was time to lay down the ground rules, “Okay, the change is to go into effect immediately, unless Perry objects. When we are in Kansas, I will tell my parents about the engagement when I want and how I want.” His tone became less authoritative and softer as he said, “Now, ask me nicely.”

Lois was shocked that Clark was playing hard ball with her on these issues and actually a little intrigued by this take-charge attitude. This was a Clark she hadn’t seen for a while. There had been times when they had been reporting partners that he had stood up to her and it was actually kinda sexy, but she didn’t really understand his question. She asked, “Ask you what?”

Clark decided that he needed to show Lois that sometimes she needed to show some humility. He crossed his arms and replied, “Ask me nicely, to marry you, Lois.”

Surprised, Lois asked, “What does that mean?”

He decided to go all out. “You heard me; generally accepted custom requires that you be on your knees.”

Shocked, Lois considered her options. They were in the middle of a busy sidewalk with pedestrians passing by in a steady flow, in the middle of downtown Metropolis, and there weren’t any options. She looked around for some other way out, but coming up with nothing, acquiesced. She said, “Fine,” and held out her hand for him to help her. He took her hand as she knelt, which wasn’t at all easy in her pencil skirt and three-inch heels. Somehow she managed to keep the strap of her bag on her shoulder. When she was finally kneeling, she looked up at Clark and asked, “Does this work for you?”

Nodding, he said, “Yeah, that’s good.”

Kneeling there on the sidewalk was humiliating. Still looking up at him, Lois asked, in an embarrassed tone, “Okay, uh, will you marry me?”

His answer was quick, “No.” He paused while she looked up at him with surprise written all over her features. He felt that she hadn’t really learned her lesson as yet, so he elaborated, “Say it like you mean it.”

Chagrined, but actually liking this take-charge attitude in Clark, she thought for a second, cleared her throat and with all of the sincerity she could muster said, “Clark ...”

“Yes, Lois.”

Her rebellious streak again manifested itself as she said, “Sweet, sweet, Clark.”

Clark had uncrossed his arms and was standing over her with his hands on his hips as he said, “I’m listening.”

In a sickly sweet tone, Lois asked, “Would you please, with chocolate syrup and a cherry on top, marry me?”

Clark thought about it for a second. Lois hadn’t learned the complete lesson he was trying to teach her, but for Lois Lane, this was a big step. He decided to accept what progress they had made and said, “Okay. I don’t appreciate the sarcasm, but I’ll do it. The flight is short, so there won’t be any in-flight meal, nor will there be a movie.” Ever the gentleman, he started to reach for her hand to help her up, but suddenly his super-hearing kicked in and he heard a call for help. It really sounded urgent, so as she reached for his hand to help her up, he turned away and said over his shoulder, “I just remembered, before we leave I have to return a tape I rented. I’ll see you at the airport in the morning,” as he dashed off into the crowd looking for somewhere to change into

The Suit.

She gaped after him; he had done it again, pulled one of his disappearing acts, abandoning her, kneeling there in the middle of the public thoroughfare. She looked around, embarrassed, but could not see any help nearby so she struggled to get up. The pencil skirt had a small slit up the back, but it didn't allow a lot of movement. Pedestrians were passing her constantly, but city dwellers are notorious for not going out of their way to help others, partly for fear that it could be a ploy leading to a mugging, so no help was forthcoming. There was not enough room to bring one of her feet up under her, but she was finally able to shift her balance by leaning back far enough and using her bag as ballast to bring her feet flat on the walk so she could stand up.

She was thankful for the length of her skirt because she hadn't needed to kneel on the rough concrete and put holes in her hose, but she was seething as she brushed the dust and debris from the sidewalk from the hem of her skirt and then headed for the Daily Planet. She was determined that she would get Clark back for this, but she'd have to wait for the right time. This was almost as bad as when she had been sent on that wild goose chase through the Metropolis Waste Reclamation Facility looking for Superman's space ship only to find a doll with an 'S' painted on its chest instead. Thinking back on it, she realized that she had actually deserved that as retribution for stealing Clark's story. Then the thought impinged that maybe she deserved this as well. Apparently she hadn't learned her lesson well enough at the time. Thinking about it, Lois realized, she hoped not too late, that she hadn't been treating Clark the way she should have been. She determined that she would be nicer to him over the weekend. After all, they were going to be married.

It had been late afternoon when they had gone to the immigration office, and by the time Clark finished with his rescue it was past working hours, so he simply went home.

Clark made a light dinner and then called home.

"Kent residence."

"Hi, Mom. Is Dad there?"

Over the line came, "Right here, son. What can we do for you?"

"There's been a change of plans. We'll be coming out to see you for the weekend."

Martha immediately picked up on what he had said and questioned, "You said we. Who is 'we'?"

"Uh, that would be Lois and me."

"You and Lois? Why the change and why is she coming with you?"

"It's a long story. We'll tell you when we get there, okay?"

"Okay, sweetheart. I guess we'll see you when you get here, then."

"Yeah. Gotta go. I have to do a patrol."

"Okay, son. We'll see you tomorrow. We're happy that your plans changed and you can make it now."

"Oh, since we are coming together, we'll be flying commercially and driving in from Wichita. Night, Dad. Night, Mom. See you tomorrow."

On the outskirts of Smallville, the rain was threatening. So far there had been only a threat of rain, but no actual precipitation. The concern of the local population was that there would be lightning without rain and that the lightning would start a fire. With the recently harvested crops there was a lot of debris left in the fields that needed to be cleaned up and bundled. The corn stalks lying on the ground would eventually be ground up for roughage.

In this rural setting there was a neat and well-maintained farm house.

As the lightning flashes lit up the surrounding countryside

they illuminated a solo individual making his way across a field and approaching the house. The frequent lightning bolts revealed the wizened face of an older man, and by his clothes it was easy to tell he was a working man – a farmer, maybe, or perhaps a mechanic since he was carrying a large tool box.

He made his way across the field and around the barn. He finally climbed the steps to the porch of the farm house and knocked on the door.

A few seconds later, Jonathan Kent opened the door and said, "Wayne! What are you doing out on a night like this?" Then over his shoulder he shouted, "Martha, it's Wayne. Put on some coffee." Turning back to Wayne Irig, and opening the door wide, Jonathan said, "Come on in, Wayne."

Wayne shook his head and said, "Not now, Jonathan. No time for that. Better out here," and he gestured for Jonathan to accompany him.

Jonathan nodded his head, grabbed his coat, and stepped out onto the porch, allowing the door to swing closed behind him.

As he shrugged into his coat he asked, "What brings you out on a night like this, Wayne?"

Wayne, never one for much in the way of conversation, cut right to the chase, "Jonathan, you know that big oak tree I got out back?"

Jonathan nodded his acknowledgement.

"Well, Tuesday's storm blew it right out of the ground."

Nodding his head again, this time in understanding, Jonathan asked, "Need some help cutting it up? I just sharpened the blade on my chain saw."

Shaking his head, Wayne replied, "No, Jonathan, that ain't it. No, uh-uh. I found somethin' under that tree. It was a rock of some sort and I sent a little chunk off to the state lab to have it checked out. That much was okay, but today I got federal agents asking me a lot of damn fool questions. Now they got bulldozers showin' up tomorrow. That's all I know. It has to be about that damn rock, that's all I can figure. I need you to keep this for me till I know what's what." With that statement, Wayne held out the toolbox and Jonathan took it.

Hefting the box Jonathan noted how heavy it was. He asked, "What do you think it is? It's as heavy as lead."

Wayne dismissed his comment, "Nah, it ain't that heavy. It's this old toolbox of mine. Handed down in the family. I think it's made of lead. What's in it is like nothin' I ever seen before, Jonathan. Somethin' weird. Here, see for yourself."

Wayne opened the catch and threw back the lid of the box. Inside was a football-sized chunk of crystalline rock, glowing as if from an inner light source, seemingly alive with energy.

Jonathan's face reflected the green glow.

"What do you think it is, Wayne?"

"I got no idea, but it's nothin' I ever laid eyes on before. Can you hide it here for me?"

"Sure, Wayne. I'll hide it."

"Thanks, Jonathan. As soon as this all blows over, I'll come and get it. I better get back before somebody misses me." With that statement, Wayne Irig turned and headed off back across the fields toward his farm.

Jonathan watched him until he was out of sight and then carried the toolbox to the shed that stood apart from the barn, near the pond.

The next morning, Lois and Clark met at the airport and as they were boarding, Lois was surprised at the size of the aircraft. She quipped, "It's smaller than I expected."

"They reserve the 747's for longer flights. This trip will only take a couple of hours."

After the takeoff, the pilot had extinguished the seatbelt sign. Lois was leafing through the Sky Mall magazine when Clark handed her a small binder. As he did, he said, "Here is a list of

probable questions that Mr. Ramsbottom could ask. The good news is that I know everything about you, but you only have four days to learn all of this about me.” As she opened it, he said, “You should probably study.”

As she looked at the first sheet, with disbelief evident in her voice, she asked, “You know the answers to all of these questions about me?”

“Scary, isn’t it?”

“A little bit. Okay. Hmmmm, what am I allergic to?”

“Pine nuts.”

“Uh huh. Oh, here’s a good one. Do I have any scars?”

Clark replied, “Scars, I don’t know, but I’m pretty sure that you have a tattoo.”

“Oh, you’re pretty sure?”

“I’m pretty sure. A few weeks ago, your dermatologist called and mentioned a Q-Switch laser. Naturally I checked and found that a Q-Switch laser is used to remove tattoos. You cancelled your appointment. So, what is it, tribal link, Japanese calligraphy, barbed wire?”

Lois gave him an annoyed smile and said, “You know, it’s exciting for me to experience you like this.”

“Thank you. You’re gonna have to tell me where it is though.”

“No, I’m not.”

“They’re bound to ask.”

Embarrassed about her tattoo, Lois tried to close that discussion by starting to turn the pages. “We’re done with that question. Done with that question. We are done with that question. On to another one.” As she thumbed through the pages looking for a question she would be comfortable with, she muttered, “Let me see. Let me see, let me see, let me see, ah, here’s one. Whose place do we stay at, yours or mine.”

“Mine, because you find it homey.”

“No, mine because I have two bedrooms.” She noticed how he was fidgeting in his seat. She asked, “There’s something I should probably know, nervous flyer?”

Shamefacedly, he replied, “Yeah, I guess so. I figure that if man was supposed to fly, he’d have been given wings or something. Being cooped up in an aluminum tube supported by nothing but air just seems unnatural.”

In a dreamy tone, Lois said, “Superman doesn’t.”

“Doesn’t what, fly?”

“No, of course he flies, he doesn’t have wings or anything.”

Just then the stewardess announced that the seatbelt sign had just been lit, “Please fasten your seat belts, we are beginning our descent into Wichita.”

Lois said, “Wichita, I thought we were going to Smallville.”

“We are. This is the nearest airport. We drive from here.”

“Oh.”

“It will give you more time to study.”

“Oh.”

After picking up the rental car, Clark got behind the wheel and started to drive. Initially he was pointing out the sights, but eventually they were outside of the city and into the farm country. As they drove, Lois complained, “Miles and miles and miles of nothing but fields of crops.”

Clark smiled and in a very upbeat tone said, “This is America’s breadbasket, Lois. I bet that half of what you eat comes from this area.”

Lois wasn’t mollified, and she continued to grumble, “Don’t tell me, 4-H changed your life.”

Clark was still being insufferably upbeat as he continued, “I can’t help it if I’m a farm kid.”

Lois, now with a sarcastic tone, replied to this sally, “If I ever need a cow milked, I’ll remember that.” Lois was thinking, <For a farm kid, he sure can write. It may not exactly be my style, but Perry might be right. Our styles do complement each other. I don’t

know how Perry does it. Actually, I guess I do know. Like he always says, ‘I didn’t get this job because I can yodel.’ Much as I hate to admit it, Clark and I were good and together ... according to Perry we could be great. Maybe the move to the editor’s office wasn’t for the best. I have to admit, he never tried to take advantage of me. He didn’t steal any of **my** stories. In fact, much as I hate to admit it, I’m the one that stole one of his. I hate it that I did that. That’s another thing about Clark; he never casts that up at me. He is so forgiving. Why can’t all men be like him? It’s such a shame; he appears to be unique, one of a kind. I even started to like working with him, but then we were promoted. I wonder if we can get back to that. If he would just stop disappearing suddenly and frequently.>

The Mustang convertible with the top down turned onto a dirt road which wound through a wooded area. Clark was driving while Lois studied. Suddenly, rounding a curve, Clark pulled the car to a halt. In front of them was a railroad crossing and there was a train passing by. The gate was down so they had to wait.

Clark and Lois resumed the discussion that had started a little earlier, “You can joke about it all you want, but take away Middle America and what have you got?”

Lois, with a one-ups-man tone, replied, “Art, music, theater ...”

Clark interrupted and added, “Crime, drugs, poverty...”

Sighing and indicating the train, Lois asked, “How long is this going to take?”

Smiling, Clark replied, “It takes as long as it takes.”

With a sidelong glance, Lois said, “I didn’t know that Zen was popular in the country.” Lois thought, <Maybe this won’t be that bad. There may be more to Mr. Greenjeans than what’s on the surface. He’s right; I really haven’t taken the time to get to know him like I should, and I need to if we are going to pass this interview. Maybe seeing him in his own environment will help me to figure him out a little. Maybe he won’t disappear while we are here.>

Clark was continuing his discourse, “It always takes people from the city a while to decompress. Fortunately for you, this weekend Smallville’s holding the annual Corn Festival.”

With a dispirited air, Lois asked, “This is a good thing?” <Hmmmmm. Maybe I can talk to some of the people that knew him growing up. I might just be able to find out if this is all a put-on or if he really is this good. If it’s a put-on, then I can keep him at arm’s length. I hope it isn’t a put-on. The time we’ve spent, working late nights together ... sharing take-out ... ohhhh, that take-out. He always gets the very best take-out. If he can do that for a working session, I wonder where he’d take me for a **date**?> She gave a mental shake, <**DATE**??> Where did that thought come from? We aren’t dating ... we’re ... *we’re getting married!*>

Clark’s almost insufferably upbeat attitude was abundantly evident as he replied, “Sure. We’ll see the Corn Queen Pageant. The Husk-Off. The Corn-O-Rama. Popcorn, creamed corn, corn-on-the-cob. We’re in luck.”

With a sarcastic tone, Lois replied, “Be still, my heart.” <Maybe with a personal guide it won’t be so bad. I hope it won’t be as boring as it sounds.>

Not allowing her negative attitude to affect him, Clark smiled in reply.

Lois interrupted, “I’ve really grown to like the Corn Festival. It really is a lot of fun. We’ve been to it several times since we’ve been married.”

Clark laughed and said, “I can hardly keep her off the dance floor. She and Rachel and Lana are still trying to outdo each other.”

Chapter 08

After Lois and Clark drove away from the railroad crossing,

they headed into town. When they reached the town center, Clark found a place to park right on Main Street. Looking around Lois saw that the public square had been converted into a mini-fairground. Across the way was a grassy area with a gazebo. A banner sign read: “Smallville Corn Festival.” Despite the small-town flavor, it was a well-organized affair, complete with a hip logo. The feel was part carnival, part craft fair, and part harvest celebration. Under the gazebo, a country-rock band was playing.

As she was exiting the car, Lois asked, “Nothing like Metropolis, is it?”

“No, it isn’t. Here everybody knows everybody. That’s the great thing about a small town. That’s what I like about coming home.” Clark interrupted what he was saying because he saw that Lois wasn’t really paying attention to him. She was looking around in wonder. He asked, “What is it?”

Standing on the sidewalk, Lois looked around in wonder. As she did a slow turn in place, she quipped, “I feel like Dorothy. Shouldn’t a tornado be flying me off to Oz pretty soon?”

Clark had a sour expression as he replied, “Bad metaphor, Lois. Yes, a tornado took her away, but the point of the story was that Dorothy wanted to get **back** to Kansas.” Looking around, he spread his arms as if to encompass the entire city turning a full circle said, “Everyone from Kansas wants to come back to Kansas.”

Thoughtfully, Lois replied, “Okay, point taken. Why did we come into town, shouldn’t we have gone to the house? Weren’t we supposed to go see your parents? Wouldn’t they be there?”

“No,” he looked around and continued, “This is the Corn Festival. They’re probably here, somewhere.” As they wandered through the crowds, Clark was looking for anyone he thought could tell him where his parents were. Lois was soaking in the atmosphere. There was an outdoor stand set up with boutique clothes. She was attracted to a display, a mannequin with a dress on it. Lois felt drawn to this particular dress, and moving over to it, started brushing it with her hand, feeling the fabric.

While Lois was doing this, Clark spotted a woman with strawberry blond hair. She had her back to him and was talking to a young girl, telling her to go find her mom. Even with her back to him, Clark thought he knew who it was. He called out, “Rachel?”

Hearing her name, she turned and seeing who it was broke out in a wide smile. Squealing in delight, she shouted, “**Clark!**” Rushing over to him, she almost leaped into his arms as she threw her arms around his neck, and he pulled her into a hug.

It suddenly occurred to Clark that she was wearing a uniform. Startled at the uniform he asked, “Rachel? Sheriff Rachel?”

Removing her arms from around his neck and stepping back slightly, Rachel Harris said, “Hey, don’t let the uniform fool you. I can still Two-Step and Tush-Push better than anybody else in town.”

As she said this, Clark was cast back in his memory to his high school years and the times he had dated Rachel. Just before their senior year, his girlfriend, Lana Lang, had been taken out of school so that she could accompany her father on an archeological dig, and as a result he had started dating Rachel. The prom had not been their first date and it was almost the last. Rachel had not said so, in so many words, but she had made it clear to Clark that she wouldn’t have objected to a more serious relationship, perhaps even an intimate one. The problem was that Clark hadn’t been sure that she was the one so he had held back. At the time, Clark had been a senior while Rachel had been a junior. Shortly after that he had graduated and gone to college on a football scholarship and then after graduation he had traveled the world. When he left, he lost track of her. It was good to see her again. In reply to her statement, he said, “I have no doubts that you can. You’ve always been a terrific dancer. It’s good to see you again. It’s been a long time.”

It had been a long time, he realized. During his world travels,

whenever he had flown in to see his parents, it had been under his own power so he had needed to avoid being seen by anyone lest questions be asked that he couldn’t or wouldn’t want to answer. The same conditions had pertained even after Superman had been created.

Rachel had her western-style uniform hat in her hands, and those hands were nervously shuffling around the brim, spinning the hat. Rachel had to admit to herself that she’d had a crush on Clark for years. The night he had taken her to the prom, she had been close to heaven. She hadn’t seen him in some time, and seeing him now, all of those old feelings came surging up. She didn’t know how to act. She felt like that schoolgirl again on that first date. She chastised herself, <Get a grip girl. That was years ago. It isn’t like you haven’t dated anyone else. There’s been a lot of water that has flowed under that bridge since prom night, but I still remember that kiss. Wow! Nobody can kiss like Clark Kent. I wonder ... maybe, if I play my cards right ... I still regret the way we left things ... unresolved.> “How long you gonna be in town?”

“I’m not sure, a few days, anyhow. It’s my parents’ anniversary this weekend.”

Rachel sidled up to Clark, put her hand on his cheek and smiled even broader at the thought as she asked, “There’s a dance tonight. Ya’ll come. I’ll show ya tonight? Old time’s sake?” <This could be my chance. Maybe after the dance I can get him alone. Maybe we can even finish what we started then. I can ask him to take me up to Reeves Overlook ...>

Lois was an interested observer to all of this. Suddenly she felt a twisting in her stomach. She hadn’t ever felt anything like this before, but seeing this country bumpkin, uniform or not, put her hands on ‘her’ soon-to-be husband, real or not, was creating an emotional upheaval that she didn’t understand. All she knew was that she had to put a stop to this. She found herself moving up behind Clark.

Clark, sensing her presence, turned to introduce them, “Uh, Rachel, Lois Lane. Lois, Rachel Harris. I guess that’s **Sheriff** Harris now.”

As Clark introduced her, Lois wrapped her hands around his arm.

Rachel, keeping her eyes strictly on Clark, was obviously ignoring Lois as she replied, and Lois didn’t like it one little bit as Rachel addressed Clark, “I beat Fordman in the last election just by promising to buy a couple of computers.” <Uh oh, who is she? Oh, yeah, the woman he works with. Maybe there’s nothing personal there. Just professional, I hope.>

Lois wasn’t about to let herself be ignored, and demonstrating that she had heard what had been said previously, she asked, “Old time’s sake?”

Rachel continued to ignore Lois, at least as far as acknowledging her presence by looking at her, though there was a hint of pride in her tone as she did answer her question, “We dated some. Clark took me to his senior prom.” There was a short pause and a worried look crossed her face as she pointed back and forth between them before she continued, “Are you two ...?”

Remembering her promise to Clark to let him choose the time and place for the announcement of their engagement, Lois was quick to reply, almost, too quick, and she felt that something was wrong with the answer she gave even as she was speaking the words, “Not yet, but ...”

Clark looked at Lois, surprised by this sudden change.

Rachel, with a look of disappointment, said, “Really? Not strictly professional, huh?” <Maybe I have a chance here. Worth a try, he’s worth the try.> Suddenly she was interrupted by her two-way radio coming to life. She turned away and listened for a second before turning back to Clark and Lois, “Duty calls. Well, Lois, we’ll have to get together and swap Clark stories later.” <Yeah, and maybe I’ll be able to add some new ones tonight, especially if I can get him away from the city girl. After all, I saw

him first.>

Lois was still hanging onto Clark's arm as they watched Rachel walk away. Lois particularly noted the un-sheriff-like sway of her hips as if she were flaunting her femininity even in the uniform. She teased, "Tush-Push?" Inwardly, Lois was furious. This woman had had a relationship with Clark and she didn't like that. She started thinking, <How can I do that? I don't have all that many stories about Clark that I can tell. I have some from the time that we were reporting partners. I bet she has lots though, lots of stories about her and Clark. Where is this jealousy coming from? Why should I be jealous of her? Clark and I are getting married, just not for real. They apparently had a history together. Would he be happier with her? Am I ruining his life by making him marry me?>

Clark could see that Lois was apparently lost in thought. He was grateful that Lois hadn't spilled the beans. Clark sought a diversion which would give him time to figure out just how and when they would make their announcement. With his super-vision he spotted his objective and started to lead Lois in that direction. His destination was a barbecue pit, sending out plumes of smoke.

As he led her in that direction he said, "Maybe we can get an early taste of the local hospitality."

Lois was allowing Clark to direct their steps, and her pensive expression softened as she said, "You go ahead. I'll just kind of soak up the 'atmosphere'." Unhesitatingly, Lois continued to follow his lead.

Clark was surprised and pleased that Lois was still hanging on his arm, and he brought his free hand over and put it on her arm, almost as if to reassure himself that this was really happening. Just as his hand was about to touch hers, she pulled her hand away. He couldn't tell if she had done it deliberately to avoid his touch or if it was coincidence, and although he was disappointed, he continued to tease her, "You know, Lois, what you can't stand is how normal it is here."

Lois was finding it hard to believe, but she actually was enjoying herself. She had felt comfortable hanging on Clark's arm, something that if someone had suggested it just yesterday, she would have laughed in their face. Suddenly, though, it felt right, somehow, and she had needed to force herself to let go. She was finding it easier to play-act at being a couple. She knew that he was teasing her and she decided to play along, "Normal? I've heard about small towns." To prove her point she pointed at the man operating the BBQ and said, "See Mister Regular Joe flipping burgers over there? I'll bet he's really a cross-dresser."

Just as Lois finished speaking and before Clark was able to react, there was a shout from the side. "Clark!" Clark quickly turned to welcome the newcomer. An older woman with strawberry-blond hair rushed over and Clark pulled her into an embrace as she said, "It's good to see ya."

Lois was thinking, <What is it with all the strawberry blondes? > Suddenly another thought hit her, <I hope that's his mom.>

As if to confirm Lois's thought, while he hugged the woman, Clark said, "Hi, Mom!"

As Clark broke the hug, Martha held onto both of his arms and looked around. Immediately she spotted Lois standing at Clark's side and started to smile even more broadly. She said, "You **must** be Lois."

Lois returned her smile as she said, "That's me. Hi ... Mrs. Kent."

Martha had a disappointed look as she said, "Please, it's Martha. Well, you sure are pretty." Her hand flew to her mouth as if she wasn't sure of what she had said, and turning to Clark, she asked, "It's okay if I tell her that, isn't it?"

Clark smiled and said, "I don't know. Why not ask her? I'd say, it's the truth, so why not?"

Lois smiled at Martha and said, "Thanks ... Martha." She felt a little uncomfortable, but his mom seemed to be very accepting.

She hoped Martha continued to be so accepting when she heard the news that Lois was about to marry her son.

Martha smiled in return and said, "You kids must be starved after your trip. Let's get you something to eat at the barbecue pit."

Clark couldn't resist teasing Lois once more, "I don't know, Mom. Lois thinks the cook might be a cross-dresser."

Martha took a second look. Lois was startled when Martha started to laugh. When Martha calmed herself sufficiently she said, "Oh, honey, that's Clark's **father!** And I can't get him to buy **me** a dress, let alone one for himself."

Hoping she hadn't said something that would turn Clark's parents against their proposed marriage, and trying to salvage some of her shredded dignity, Lois said, "I was just ... illustrating ... a point ... really." Considering the fact that Martha seemed to have been amused by the comment, Lois didn't think that any irreparable harm had been done and started to relax somewhat.

Martha was still laughing about the idea of Jonathan being a cross-dresser as they moved in the direction of the BBQ pit. Lois followed along behind Martha and Clark as they walked. Martha said, "Wait'll he hears that."

Relief flooded over Lois when she heard Martha's statement and she relaxed completely because she realized that Martha had simply been amused by the comment and had not taken offense.

Jonathan looked up from his chore, and seeing them approach, he smiled. His chef's hat was worn at a jaunty angle; he had a spatula in one hand with a burger on it and a pair of tongs holding an ear of corn in the other. As soon as they were close enough, he addressed Lois, "I feel like I know you already, Lois. Care for an ear?"

Lois's curiosity got the best of her, she just had to ask, "Sure, I'll have the corn, but why do you 'feel like you know me'?"

Jonathan smiled and replied, guilelessly, "Because Clark can't stop talking about you. How good looking you are ..."

Clark, who was embarrassed by this frank talk, interrupted, "Dad!"

He no sooner got that out than Martha piled on, "and what a good writer ..."

Again, Clark interrupted, "Mom!" and rolled his eyes.

Lois laughed at his discomfiture.

Undeterred, Martha continued, "Anyway, Lois, welcome to Smallville. We've got your room all ready for you."

Everything had happened so quickly that Lois hadn't given any thought to a place to stay. Partly, she had been relying on Clark to handle that since it was his home town and she was still thinking of him as her assistant. Hearing this she was startled and said, "My room? Oh, I wouldn't think of putting you out. I'll be staying in a motel." The statement just was there before she could stop it.

Jonathan smirked and asked, "During the Corn Festival? Every room in Lowell County was booked up months ago."

Martha added, "Even if there **was** a room, I wouldn't hear of you staying anywhere else. Family doesn't sleep in a motel."

'Family?' The use of that word startled Lois. Had Clark said something to his parents? If he had, how much had he told them? His condition on agreeing to the marriage had been that he would tell them at the time of his choosing. Had he called them the previous evening? Was this now a conspiracy? Well, two could play at that game.

Clark was halfway afraid to look at Lois to see her reaction, but when he did, she had a shocked expression. Perhaps it was Martha's use of the word family. Clark stepped in to explain, "What she means is that family and friends of the family can always stay at the house."

As he watched, Lois visibly relaxed.

Martha pulled Clark aside and started talking in a low tone. Lois could see that Clark wanted some time to talk with his

parents, so she wandered off. As Lois wandered around she suddenly found herself at the boutique booth again. Seeing that the dress was still on display, she wandered over to it and started stroking it thoughtfully again.

The salesgirl stepped up to her and asked, “Can I help you?”

Lois said, “I think you can. Do you take credit cards?”

“We sure do.”

“Good. How much is this dress?”

“The one on the mannequin?”

“Well, do you have one like it? I’d need to make sure it’s my size.”

“Miss, that’s a one of a kind, an original. It was handmade so that’s the only one. You’d have to try it on.”

Lois replied, “I don’t think I need to. Just take it off the mannequin. I’ll take it.”

While the salesgirl was removing the dress from the display, Lois looked around for footwear.

Once she had paid for her purchases she took the packages, and going across the street to Maisie’s Diner, she entered the Lady’s Room, or at least what she assumed was the Lady’s Room. On the door was a stick figure in a dress, but the legend was Heifers. Glancing at the other door she saw the corresponding stick figure and the word Bulls. Shaking her head she thought, <You’d think we were in cattle country. Obviously someone’s attempt at humor.>

As she was entering one of the stalls, she thought, <Well, this is appropriately named. Don’t they keep cattle in stalls?> Smiling to herself at the joke, she quickly removed her pants outfit and pulled the dress out of the package. She was now standing in the stall wearing just her bra and panties, with the door closed as she held the dress up to look at it. Her mind made up, she unbuttoned the dress and slipped it on over her head. As she smoothed it down over her hips she felt the soft fabric and a sense of rightness. Quickly, she buttoned the dress up, and as she was sure would be the case, it fit like it had been made especially for her. She next slipped into her new footwear, then putting her pant suit into the bag, she exited the Lady’s Room. Knowing how the dress felt and how she felt wearing it, which was very feminine, she was feeling like anything other than a Heifer.

She stopped at their Mustang and put her bags into the trunk. Almost as an afterthought she placed her precious camel-colored bag in with the clothes and then she headed back to the festival to find Clark.

Clark had been talking with his parents, paving the way for the announcement, when Lois came up. Looking up and seeing her, Clark said, “My, don’t you look nice. I don’t remember seeing that dress before.”

“That’s because you haven’t. I just bought it. I felt, I don’t know, a little ... out of place. What I was wearing just wasn’t right. It was ‘Metropolis.’ When in Smallville ...” As she finished speaking she let go an embarrassed giggle at her play on words.

All Clark could do was stare at her. If he hadn’t already been in love with her, he surely would be falling for her. It was a small gesture, but it showed that she was serious about the situation. Lois was gorgeous! He had never seen her in a dress so becoming. He had seen her dressed for a ball, he had seen her dressed for work, and he had seen her dressed casually, but for some reason, this outfit sent his mind into a whirl. It was a long brown dress which had a light flowered print and a deep wide ‘V’ neckline. She preferred her skirts long and this one was almost floor length with a slit up the front to the knee. It was very flattering to her figure accentuating her narrow waist and full bosom. She had also purchased a pair of western boots to complete the ensemble which showed through the slit in the front of the skirt. With the look of a hungry dog staring at a steak, Clark said, “All I can say is ... Wow!”

Smiling at his response, Lois did a pirouette and asked, “So,

you like?”

Clark’s response was a heartfelt, “And how!”

Lois’s smile broadened, “Good, because I wanted to please you. I wanted to, I don’t know, fit in. Be a part of ‘your world.’”

“Lois, dressed like that you’ll be the belle of the ball.”

“That’s good, because I intend to have you dance with me tonight.” <Okay Ms. Two Step and Tush-Push, it’s time for you to meet your competition.>

Clark interrupted, “Oh, no. I think I see where this is going. That was the Kryptonite that Wayne gave to my Dad. Is that Trask at the farm? Did they have to go through that?”

With an enigmatic smile, Herb replied, “Yes, it was the Kryptonite, but things didn’t turn out quite the same way as it did with you and Trask. Almost, but not quite.”

“Come on, Herb. Tell us some more.”

“All right, Lois, I shall.”

Chapter 09

Later that evening, as a special activity of the Corn Festival, a dance was being held at the Grange Hall. To prepare for it, the Bingo setup had been pushed off to one side so the stage could be converted into a bandstand. The tables and chairs had all been stacked on one side to make room for a dance floor. Flanking the doors were bundled cornstalks and some scarecrows and other decorations were added to carry out the corn harvest theme.

While the band was setting up, the Corn Queen, Camille Davis, and her court had been there to open the festivities. She was a strawberry blonde with a striking figure and happened to be a young cousin of Rachel Harris. She was wearing her crown, but the males in the audience were not disappointed. Even though she wasn’t wearing her bathing suit (which many had hoped for) or even the evening gown, she *was* wearing a pair ‘Daisy Dukes’, a crop top, western boots and a ten gallon hat.

Clark had changed into a flannel shirt and jeans, while Lois was wearing her new dress. The dress was extremely well tailored and clung to her curves like a second skin, with a deep scooped ‘V’ neckline. Despite the neckline, it still only showed a hint of cleavage which suited Lois’s taste in attire. She also liked the fact that the dress was long and that the slit only came to just above the knee.

There were easily forty or fifty couples on the dance floor while Lois and Clark were standing on the fringes watching as a country line dance formed up. Clark was watching the dancing, but Lois was keeping an eye on the doors, looking for her rival. As the band started playing their third song, Lois spotted Rachel coming in through the doors between the cornstalks. Rachel had changed out of her uniform and was now dressed in a western-style outfit, western shirt with the tails tied baring her midriff and several buttons undone showing plenty of cleavage, and western-style boots with a short skirt with crinolines under it. The outfit was designed to show off her form and emphasize her legs and it did a good job of it. Seeing her attire, Lois knew instinctively that she was on the prowl and that her prey was Clark, so Lois decided to act preemptively. Grabbing Clark’s hand, she started dragging him onto the dance floor, as she said, “Come on, Clark, let’s give it a whirl.”

Clark’s reply didn’t encourage her. He asked, “You’re kidding, right?”

Lois watched as Rachel approached, and the closer she got, the more urgently Lois implored Clark to get on the dance floor. She said, “No, I’m not kidding. I want to dance with you, but only if you promise not to breathe a word about it to anyone at the Planet.”

Clark held up his hand in the Boy Scout salute and said, “I promise,” and stopped resisting as she dragged him onto the dance floor and into the lines.

Lois watched carefully as the people in the lines started to move and copied their movements. Clark was surprised to see Lois display such skill in the dance and said, “Wow, you really **do** know how to dance!”

Smiling, Lois had replied, “This isn’t the kind of dancing I grew up doing, but dance is dance, if you know what I mean.”

“What kind of dancing did you do, growing up?”

“I guess you’d call it French Canadian Step Dancing. It’s like your Clogging, or Irish Step Dancing, only not quite so stiff. Last year a girlfriend at the dojo convinced me to learn country line dancing. She said that it would be a good way to meet guys.”

Surprised, Clark asked, “Was it?”

Lois laughed and quipped, “Define guys.”

By her broad smile, Clark could tell Lois was having a good time.

Rachel could also see how well Lois moved and took up the challenge. <She wants to make this a contest, huh? We’ll just see about that.> Joining the line right next to Lois, Rachel tried her best to outperform Lois in the moves of the dance. However, try as she might, whatever move was called for, Lois performed it with at least equal and most of the time more grace and skill than Rachel. It looked like Lois had a natural flair for dance. Rachel was a little hampered by the fact that she had several buttons of her top undone and was going out of her way to exaggerate some of the moves to show off her bodice and make her skirt flare up to display her legs.

Clark could see the sidelong glances the two girls were giving one another as they danced and he came to the realization that they were both dancing for him because they were also looking at him to gauge his responses. As the competition proceeded it became more and more energetic, and Clark was surprised when he actually broke a sweat, an unusual occurrence for him. The girls were undeterred as the dance continued, vying to outdo one another. Clark couldn’t help but admit that Lois was the superior dancer, and as the song came to an end even Rachel had to admit that she had met her match.

That song was the end of a set, so while the band was busily putting away their instruments everything was silent and people started milling around. Slowly groups started to form. Since Clark had been away from Smallville for so long many of his old friends started to drift in his direction.

Rachel addressed Lois, “You know, for a city gal, you sure can dance!”

Lois couldn’t help rubbing it in a little and said, “You’re not so bad yourself, but when you ‘Tush-Push’, you need to add a little,” she demonstrated, “at the end.”

Rachel was mortified; this city girl had the gall to tell her how to dance! Rachel could see the Kents out of the corner of her eye and felt it would be a good time to reestablish her relationship with Clark. She sidled up to him, and putting her arms around his neck, went up on tip-toe to give him a kiss.

Putting his hands on her upper arms and pushing her away slightly, Clark stopped her and said, “No, Rachel, we can’t do that.”

Surprised, Rachel challenged, “Why not?”

In a tone barely above a whisper, but in the tone loud enough for all those nearby to hear, he replied, “Because I’m getting married.”

There was a collective gasp from Rachel, and from a number of their other friends that were standing around as well, and his parents were stunned. As Rachel’s arms dropped from his hands, she stepped back and blurted out, “What did you say?”

With a sheepish look at his parents, he repeated, “I’m getting married.” He held out a hand to Lois, which after taking a step closer she took in one of hers, and he said, “Lois and I are getting married.”

She had taken his hand when he had held his out, but Lois was

shocked speechless. This was how he chose to announce that they were getting married? Just blurring it out, here at the dance! She flushed with embarrassment.

Martha’s hands flew up and covered her gasp. Jonathan stepped forward and asked, “This is awfully sudden, isn’t it, Clark?”

“Yeah, I know, Dad. I meant to tell you guys earlier, but the time never seemed to be right.”

Pete Ross happened to be there, and stepping over to Clark, he placed his hand on Clark’s shoulder and said, “Well, buddy, that’s good news. How did it happen?”

Clark hadn’t thought about a backstory and asked, “How did what happen?”

Pete smiled and asked, “How did you meet? When did you fall in love? How did you ask her to marry you?”

Knowing just how lousy a liar he was, Clark decided that the truth was the way to go. “Oh, well, that’s easy, we met when I interviewed at the Daily Planet. Lois was actually the one that got me the job. We started working together. It just . . . happened.”

Billy Eck, another one of Clark’s high school buddies, shouted, “Kiss her!”

Others took up the chant, “Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her!” As they did, they formed a circle around the ‘happy couple’.

Clark could see that Lois was obviously embarrassed. She was already flushed and this only served to deepen her color from a light pink to a shade of rose.

This was a circumstance that they hadn’t prepared for. Lois was thinking that something like this would never have happened in either Montreal or Metropolis.

Clark tried to placate the crowd and rescue her from this embarrassing situation by taking the hand he was already holding and kissing the back of it. After which he put up their joined hands and said, “There, how about that?”

Billy Eck, Pete Ross and Clark had been very close all through high school. They had been like the three musketeers. On the football team, Clark had been the quarterback, Pete the offensive left tackle, and Billy a wide receiver. There had always been the strongest camaraderie between these three, and Billy, for one, was not going to be satisfied with half measures. Billy egged him on, “Come on, Clark! A real kiss!”

There was no surprise when Pete joined in, “Yeah, buddy, a real kiss!”

Then they all started the chant again, “Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her!”

He looked at her and shrugged as if to say, ‘Sorry, but if we don’t do this they won’t stop.’

She looked at him apprehensively and looked around as if looking for an escape route, but finding none, decided to bow to the inevitable. Standing rigidly, she tilted her head back and pursed her lips.

Clark, seeing her rigid attitude, tried to make it as easy on her as he could. He leaned in and delivered a rather chaste peck on the lips.

Billy and Pete both hooted and shouted, “Come on, Clark! You can do better than that!”

He looked at Lois, apology in his eyes as he stepped up to her.

Realizing that there was no way to avoid the inevitable, she prepared. Her arms were rigidly at her sides and her fists were clenched as she tilted her head back and stared, challengingly, at him as he closed the distance. The first contact was gentle, almost tentative. His lips were soft and warm. Her eyes had widened in surprise at how nice it actually felt. She didn’t know what she should have expected, but it felt better than any kiss she had experienced in her life. Based on hearing the continued chanting, she realized that they were not going to break the kiss any time soon and a nagging feeling in the back of her mind told her that she didn’t really want to. As the contact persisted, she started to

relax into it and her eyes drifted shut. She was trying to tell herself that it was only for show, but her body started to react of its own accord. Slowly, as the kiss continued, her arms started to move. Before she realized it her fists were un-clenched and her hands had slid up his chest and over his shoulders, around behind his head, and her fingers were twined in his hair.

Feeling this, Clark's arms had moved around her body and were splayed across her back, pulling her into the kiss.

As he pulled her into the kiss, she felt her entire body coming into fuller contact. Her body practically melted into his. She stretched up on tip-toe, lifted one foot in the air behind herself, and parted her lips slightly.

Feeling her mouth open, Clark swiped his tongue along her lower lip.

With his super-hearing, Clark could hear a faint moan emanating from the back of her throat as the kiss deepened.

Slowly, tentatively, Clark pushed his tongue forward. He felt an almost electric shock when her tongue came out to meet his. When they touched they started a slow tango, thrusting and touching and tasting each other.

After what seemed an eternity to Lois, Clark finally broke the kiss. He pulled away, but she was in a blissful fog and incapable of movement. She simply stood there, eyes closed, lips parted, head tilted back, breathing heavily for almost a minute.

Clark was also breathing heavily while standing there holding her in his arms, not wanting to move.

As the kiss had progressed, the chanting had ceased and an awed hush had fallen over the audience.

When Lois and Clark finally came back to Earth and looked around, all they saw was envy in the eyes of the onlookers.

Pete Ross broke the spell, "Wow, I never would have thought you had it in you, Clark. That was ... some kiss."

Lois still had a dreamy expression as she said, "Yeah, it was, wasn't it."

Rachel Harris said to Clark in a rather disappointed tone, "You never kissed me like that, Clark." She turned to Lois and asked, "Where's the ring? Didn't Clark get you a ring?"

Lois stuttered, "No ... no, not yet. We, uh, it was a spur of the moment thing. There was no time. He just surprised me. I guess we need to get one, right, honey?"

Clark nodded in reply.

Billy Eck reached for Rachel's hand and asked, "Can I try?" "Try what?"

"Try to kiss you the way Clark kissed Lois."

Rachel and Billy had dated off and on since school. Realizing after seeing that kiss that any hopes she might harbor of reuniting with Clark were dashed, Rachel turned to Billy and said, "You can try."

Rachel placed her hand in Billy's and he led her away.

The party broke up quickly after that.

A little later, a battered pickup truck and a Mustang convertible pulled off the road and entered the drive leading to a quaint farm house. After parking, Jonathan and Martha exited the pickup while Lois and Clark exited the Mustang. After closing the car door, Lois simply stood there looking at the house while Clark got the luggage out of the back. She was thinking, <Quaint, unpretentious, just about what I expected.>

Lois followed Clark to the house. As they entered, Lois found herself in the family room. Off on one side she spotted an easel with an unfinished painting on it. The painting was in a sort of cubist-expressionist style. Very abstract.

Martha was somewhat nervous about having Lois, now her soon-to-be daughter-in-law, in the house for the first time. Lois was used to the big city with all of its luxuries and conveniences. What if she ran out screaming because the house was so rustic? Martha was cradling a dozen ears of corn, wrapped in a red and

white checkered cloth, that she had brought home from the Festival. As Lois entered, Martha turned to her and said, "It's just an old farm house, but it's home." She saw Lois was staring at her painting. She asked, "That's my latest. What do you think?"

Lois didn't want to offend Clark's mother, so she had a thoughtful expression as she said, "I like it. It's... very... different."

Martha smiled brightly, and looking at Jonathan, said, "Jonathan has been saying that nobody would ever be able to figure out what it is. What do you think it is?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Lois admitted, "I'm sorry, I have no clue."

Martha let out a sigh and said, "I guess Jonathan's right. It's a bowl of fruit."

Tilting her head to the side, Lois said, "Oh, yeah, I can kinda see it now."

Martha thought for a second before she asked, "Now you're in Clark's room. Clark can take the couch. Unless you two are ..."

She looked at them with a question in her eyes. Lois and Clark looked at each other and Lois thought about it. If it got back to Mr. Ramsbottom that they slept in different rooms it wouldn't look right so she said, "Uh, yes, yes we are."

Nodding, Martha said, "Clark, I think your father wants to talk to you. Why don't I take Lois up and get her settled." Martha had her left arm around Lois's waist and Lois's right arm in her right hand. As she started to lead Lois away, she turned, and looking over her left shoulder she mouthed, "I love her" to Clark. As they were disappearing up the stairs, Clark heard Martha say, "I hope you're not allergic to down pillows."

"No, just pine nuts."

As soon as Lois and Martha were out of sight, Jonathan laid a hand on Clark's arm to stop him from following. When he had Clark's attention he said, "Clark, something is going on over at Wayne Irig's place."

"What kind of thing, Dad?"

"There's a bunch of Feds tearing up the place. They say that they are EPA and looking for pesticides. Wayne thinks they're looking for something all right. Something odd, but not pesticides."

"How do you know? If not, pesticides, then what, Dad?"

"Trust me; they're not looking for pesticides up the road, Clark. Come with me. I have something to show you." Jonathan led the way through the kitchen, out the back door and into the shed.

Jonathan closed the door after them and turned on the lights as they entered the shed. In the semi-darkness he led the way around bales of hay and bags of seed corn and reached behind a rack of tools to retrieve an old tool box. As they were moving Jonathan related the story. "Wayne Irig found a rock on his property last week. He sent a sample of it on to Wichita for analysis. Then the Feds showed up. He told me he found it when a storm knocked that tree over. I remember that tree. He planted it at Nellie's request, just about the time we found you."

Musingly, Clark said, "That doesn't make any sense. Why go to all that trouble for a rock?"

In a conspiratorial tone, Jonathan answered his question, "Because the preliminary report said it was some kind of *meteorite*. Wayne thought it might be worth some money. He gave it to me for safekeeping after the government types started pushing him around." Jonathan placed the box on top of a hay bale.

As Jonathan finished speaking he opened the lid of the lead tool box and the light coming from the crystal permeated the barn with its sickening green glow. Behind him Clark suddenly stumbled back as pain lanced through his body. He suddenly felt weak and nauseous ... sensations he had never felt in his life, not even when he had been vulnerable as a child.

Still looking at the rock and not knowing that Clark was in distress, Jonathan continued to speak, “I figure since it was found a few miles from where we found you that it was probably related.” Jonathan lifted the box and turned toward Clark so that he could get a closer look. The closer he came, the worse Clark felt.

Clark held up his hand in a stop gesture and said, in a weak voice, “Dad, I’m feeling kinda strange.” As he finished speaking he stumbled backward until he was finally against the wall and couldn’t back away any farther.

Jonathan had never seen Clark in any kind of distress before and had no idea as to how to handle the situation. Nervously, he asked, “Clark, what is it?” In his concern for Clark all he could think of was to set the box down on the floor, but unfortunately for Clark, he left it open and it was in close proximity to Clark.

Weakly, Clark replied, “I don’t know.”

Jonathan asked, “Are you sick?”

Unsure and confused, Clark replied, “Maybe. I guess. I’ve never been sick before so I don’t know.” Grabbing his stomach, Clark bent over and looked like he was about to vomit.

Jonathan looked at the toolbox and asked, “My God, do you think it’s this thing?”

Barely conscious, Clark was too far gone to reply. His face was contorted in pain as his knees buckled and he knocked over some bags of seed corn as he collapsed to the floor.

Startled and not thinking clearly at seeing Clark falling, Jonathan simply stepped over to Clark, ignoring the old tool box. Lifting him partly from the shed floor he nervously asked, “Clark! What’s happening?”

Not knowing what else to do he shouted, “*Martha*!” There was no way for him to know that Martha was still upstairs with Lois, getting her settled in. When she didn’t come immediately, Jonathan started to drag Clark from the shed and his path took him past the tool box. Because of Clark’s higher density it was impossible for him to lift Clark. All the time he was muttering, “My boy ... my poor, poor boy ...” As they were passing close to the box, Jonathan could feel Clark writhing in pain even though he was unconscious and unresponsive otherwise.

Eventually, Jonathan made it to the back porch with Clark. As the distance from the shed and the rock increased, his pain decreased and he started to come around. About this time, Martha came downstairs, and seeing that the living room was empty, she started wondering where Clark and Jonathan had gone. The most likely place being the shed she headed in that direction. As soon as she opened the back door she saw Jonathan dragging Clark and immediately was at his side. Between them, with what little assistance Clark was able to give, they were able to support him while he tried to stand, each taking one of his arms across their shoulders. They managed to get him into the kitchen and they lowered him into a chair.

Like any mother, the first thing Martha did was to feel his head. When she did, she declared, “Clark, honey, you’re burning up.” Moving to a cabinet she pulled out a thermometer and after shaking it down placed it in his mouth.

Mumbling around the thermometer, Clark said, “Don’t get scared, Mom. My body doesn’t work like other people’s bodies.”

Jonathan moved to the sink and filled a metal pitcher with water, and turning around he asked, “How do you feel? That’s the important thing.”

Still mumbling around the thermometer, Clark replied, “Better. I actually think I feel ... better.” As he finished speaking the thermometer exploded.

When the thermometer exploded, it startled Martha and she jumped and exclaimed, “Oh!” Then she saw exactly what had happened and said, “Oh, my ...”

Removing the rest of the thermometer from his mouth, Clark said, “It doesn’t mean anything, Mom. You know I’m different.”

Martha quipped, “That’s the first time I ever saw a thermometer explode. Remind me not to do that anymore.”

Jonathan placed the pitcher of water he had just filled on the table next to a glass. As he did he asked, “What do you mean, you ‘think’ you feel better? Don’t you know?”

Martha looked at Jonathan with a how-can-you-ask-that look as she said, “He’s never been sick before, Jonathan! It’s a new experience for him. He has no point of reference.”

Clark tried to lift the water pitcher to pour a glass for himself, but his hand was shaking so much with the effort that it was apparent to all that there would be more water on the table than in the glass, so Jonathan took the pitcher from him to do the job.

Dismayed, Clark indicated the water pitcher and in a hushed tone said, “I lifted a rocket into orbit, but right now I can’t even lift this.”

As Jonathan handed him the glass of water, Martha tried to reassure him, “Don’t worry, honey, you’ll bounce back.”

Jonathan mused, “Why would a rock hurt him?”

Martha answered in a matter-of-fact tone, “Because it’s poison. Because it must have something to do with Clark’s arrival here. Whatever it is ...”

They heard Lois on the stairs and quieted. She was wearing one of Clark’s robes. It swam on her, but it covered her very thoroughly. She looked closely at Clark and said, “Clark, you look horrible.” She moved over and started stroking his hair, hooking her finger in his front lock and brushing it aside in a tender gesture.

Clark reveled in her touch, but knew that he had to say something, “It’s my allergies.”

Lois said, “Poor baby, you never said anything about allergies before. I don’t remember that being in the binder.”

“They haven’t bothered me for a while. I guess I forgot to include it.”

She thought, <I need to take care of him. It would be expected.> “Come on, honey, let Lois take care of you.”

Martha said, “His allergies only act up at this time of the year. Must be the pollens or something.”

Jonathan chimed in, “Yeah, real bad this time of the year.”

Finally, Lois gently teased Clark. She leaned in, showing some décolletage as she did and whispered in his ear, “I tried to warn you about those amber waves of grain.” Standing again, she said to Clark, “Come on, honey, let’s go to bed.”

Taking Clark by the arm, she led him upstairs.

Lois stopped Herb and said, “Wow! That’s all I can say. Martha and Jonathan are still trying to protect Clark’s secret. Lois is trying to make it look like they are a serious couple. She doesn’t know just how close he is to his family and if she did, she’d know that she isn’t fooling anyone, especially Martha and Jonathan.”

Clark added, “It’s like they were acting at cross purposes with everyone hiding things from the others. Why didn’t they just be honest with Mom and Dad, explain the situation and enlist their help?”

Herb pointed out, “Lois still didn’t know Clark’s secret and he still didn’t know if he was going to reveal it to her. There was the possibility that everything would fall through making it all moot.”

Once they were upstairs, Clark grabbed a pair of sweats and a T-shirt and disappeared into the bathroom to change.

When he came out, Lois gave him an appreciative appraisal. The musculature of his arms and torso struck her, again. She remembered back when she had gone to pick him up at the Apollo Hotel when they were on the Space Station Investigation. All he had been wearing was a towel wrapped around his hips and his glasses. She fought the urge to put her hands on him.

When they were in the room with the door closed, she said, “You take the bed.” She took a couple of pillows off the bed along

with some blankets and laid them on the floor.

Gently, Clark stopped her and said, “No. You take the bed.” He moved over and stretched out on the blankets on the floor.

Lois said, “Well, okay. If you insist.”

“I insist. Go to bed.” He was thinking, <With my powers gone, at least I don’t have to worry about floating in my sleep.>

She started to open the robe, but before she did, she said, “Close your eyes.”

The light was dim, but there was a night light.

Clark said, “Okay.” He decided that he would cheat and keep his eyes open.

Lois checked, “You’re sure they’re closed?”

“Yep.”

She opened the robe to reveal a short nightie in pastel blue. It was filmy and mostly transparent.

Clark gasped and said, “That’s the nightie you chose to bring to Smallville?”

As she quickly climbed onto the bed and pulled a blanket up to cover herself, she said, “I was going to be in a hotel room, by myself, remember? Besides, you weren’t supposed to be looking.”

In his own defense, Clark said, “I think I really need to know what you wear and what you look like if we are going to pass Mr. Ramsbottom’s tests.”

Thoughtfully, Lois asked, “Assuming we pass his tests, how soon should we get married?”

“We probably shouldn’t wait too long.”

There was a tone of disappointment in her voice as she said, “Yeah, I guess the sooner we are married, the sooner we can divorce.”

“I think that we might have to spend a little time here checking on some things before we can head back to Metropolis.”

You can promote a reporter out of reporting, but you can never take the reporter out of the person. Lois’s interest was piqued, “What kind of things?”

“My dad told me there are some federal types tearing up a neighbor’s farm. He’s convinced that they are lying about the reason. They say it’s because of pesticides, but he knows that Wayne never used any.”

“What could they be looking for?”

“He’s not sure, but the whole setup looks fishy. He asked if we could check it out.”

“Look, we didn’t come here to investigate anything. We came here to announce our engagement. We’ve done that. We could probably go home tomorrow.”

“You can go back, but I’m staying here. It may be nothing, but if it is something, I need to know what it is.”

“Oh, okay, if you insist, we’ll stay and investigate.”

Lois interrupted Herb again, “I feel sorry for that Clark. At least my Clark got to sleep on that comfy sofa.”

“Someday I’ll tell you about another couple. I had to give her some of her future memories, memories of their married life. Because of those memories, she was used to sleeping with Clark. She actually had her Clark join her in bed because she couldn’t sleep without him being there.” (See Green, Green Glow of Home — Matchmaker Style)

Clark added, “At least there was no chance of him floating in his sleep and giving away The Secret.”

Herb pointed out, “Ah, but now they knew that something was happening over on the Irig farm. I have to admit, I was curious as to just how different this universe was from yours, so I delved deeper into what happened. I didn’t just follow Lois and Clark. I’ll try to give you the entire picture.”

Chapter 10

In the morning, Martha and Jonathan tip-toed down the stairs so as not to disturb Lois and Clark. They moved into the kitchen

and Martha put on the coffee.

They had discussed the revelation of the previous evening after they had gone upstairs to bed. The decision that they had reached was that the situation was unusual, but they had confidence in Clark and would support him even if they didn’t completely understand what was happening. They were determined to take it all in stride and hope that Clark would explain at the right time.

Even before Jonathan had a chance to start his morning chores, Clark came downstairs, by himself. As he entered the kitchen, he saw his father still at the table. Martha smiled and asked, brightly, “Where’s Lois?”

Clark’s hair was mussed. Nonchalantly he replied, “Oh, she’ll be down shortly. She’s getting dressed.” What he didn’t say was that she had kicked him out of the bedroom so that she could dress in private.

Jonathan handed him a cup of coffee and indicated that Clark should sit at the table. Clark started spooning sugar into the coffee as Jonathan received a second cup from Martha as she moved to the table with her cup in her other hand.

Once they were all seated, Jonathan asked, “What are your intentions with her, Clark? This announcement you made last night, is that for real? Why haven’t you said anything before now?”

Clark thought as he was pouring cream into his coffee before he answered his father’s question, “I want to marry her, Dad. It’s a weird situation that we are in, but that doesn’t change how I feel. I’ve known for a while that I wanted to marry her. Things just ... snowballed ... suddenly.”

Smiling, Martha reached into her apron pocket and produced a little paper wrapped packet which she placed on the table in front of Clark. She said, “I think the time has finally come. I believe that you can use this.”

Clark opened the paper to reveal an antique engagement and wedding ring set.

Martha explained, “After your announcement last night, I knew something had changed and you’d need it. I’ve been saving that for you for a long time. It was your Grandma Clark’s ring. It was her grandmother’s before her. It’s been in the family for almost a hundred years and I’m sure she’d want you to have it.”

Clark looked at it closely and with appreciation he said, “Thanks, Mom. I’m sure she’ll love it.” Hearing Lois coming down the stairs, Clark quickly wrapped the ring up and stuffed it into his pocket.

A few seconds later Lois came downstairs wearing a pair of brown slacks, a beige top, and the jacket from the suit she had worn the day before. The brown complemented her hair color. As Lois came through the door, she took in the tableau, a close loving family at the table, and it brought a tear to her eye. It was so sharp a contrast to what she’d had growing up because of her parents’ divorce. This was something that she really hadn’t realized that she missed until she saw it being modeled in front of her. She wished with all of her heart that some day her own family would be like Clark’s, but she didn’t hold much hope of that because she was convinced that her own marriage would turn out like her parents’. She smiled weakly at Clark, and noting that he was still in sweats and a T-shirt, she said, “Don’t you think you should get dressed, partner? We’ve got a big day ahead of us.”

Clark stood and said, “You’re right. I’ll be right back,” as he headed for the stairs.

As he was exiting, Martha asked, “Lois, did you sleep well? Would you like some coffee?” She hesitated for a second and added, “It isn’t one of those fancy lattes or anything, just plain, old, home brewed coffee.”

Lois smiled and said, “Martha, you’re a life saver. Yes, I slept well, especially once Clark’s allergies settled down, and yes, I’d love some coffee. Thank you.”

From her statement, Jonathan deduced that Lois, in fact, did not know about Clark's secret, so he asked, "So, what do you and Clark have planned for today?"

After Lois took an appreciative sip of the coffee and let out a sigh of pleasure, she replied, "We're planning on checking that other farm."

Jonathan's interest was piqued and he asked, "Wayne Irig's place?"

Lois took another swallow of her coffee and nodding said, "Yeah, that's the one."

Martha had finished her coffee and gone back to the stove to finish the breakfast preparations, and when Clark came back downstairs she was placing breakfast on the table.

Lois had never been one to have a big breakfast, but with it all laid out before her, she indulged. They were in something of a hurry, so she kept it rather simple with bacon, eggs, toast and more coffee.

After breakfast, Lois and Clark were out the door to pursue the investigation. Clark was still concerned. He wasn't so weak that a kitten could bowl him over, but he was not his normal self, at least what was normal for him, and that concerned him. What would he do if Lois, as usual, didn't check the water level and got herself in over her head? In his current condition, there was no way he would be able to rescue her and that really concerned him. He was happy that she insisted on driving and that she liked having the convertible top down. It gave him a chance to bask in the sunshine, though this early in the morning it wasn't nearly strong enough for his liking. Since the Irig farm was so close to the Kent farm, the trip between the two was relatively short.

By the time the Mustang drove up to the barricade it was mid-morning. On the other side of the barricade they could see various pieces of large earth-moving equipment and workers walking around wearing what looked, to the uneducated eye, like space suits.

One of the individuals in a protective suit, upon seeing them pull up, entered one of the tents that had been set up. Seconds later an attractive African-American woman came out of the tent and approached the barricade.

In typical Mad Dog Lane fashion, as soon as they rolled to a stop, Lois was about to jump out of the car and attack, but she noticed that Clark was holding back. She was instantly concerned. Had the allergy problem from last night persisted? Did he need her to take care of him? Concern in her voice, she asked, "You coming? Are you okay?"

His reply was not satisfying, "You go ahead. I'll just be a minute."

She leaned over and put her hand on his forehead. After a few seconds she gave her diagnosis, "You feel normal."

Nodding his head, he agreed with her, "I am normal." But he was thinking, <Normal for an Earth man, not a Kryptonian.>

Knowing nothing of his quandary, Lois asked, "So ... everything's okay, right?" She fervently hoped so. With everything that had been happening, she was starting to think that this had been the wrong thing to do. She actually liked Clark's parents. His mom was so sweet and accepting and his dad was like a cuddly teddy bear. If she wasn't careful she might start to think of this as more than a marriage of convenience — a fake marriage. If she allowed that to happen, then when it came time for the actual divorce she would be as devastated as she had been when her parents divorced. She would need to try and keep them at arm's length. The more she allowed herself to like them the harder it would be when the inevitable end came. She needed to concentrate on simply getting through this weekend and getting back to Metropolis and her real life and that depended on Clark. They had promised to look into the situation at this other farm. It couldn't be anything important so it shouldn't take too long. As soon as they had done due diligence they would head out.

Even though he knew it was a lie, nonetheless he nodded his head to reassure her, and Clark said, "Everything's okay."

Reassured, Lois accepted this and reaching for the door handle said, "Okay, then, let's go."

After piling out of the car, Lois strode up to the barricade and approached the attractive black woman standing there. She wore a name tag which read, 'Carol Sherman, E.P.A.'. Without even waiting for them to introduce themselves, the woman flatly stated, "Off limits to the public."

Lois pulled out her press pass and displayed it as she said, "We're not the public, we're the press."

In reply, Sherman said, "We've already issued a statement to the local paper."

As it was obvious that Sherman did not know who she was dealing with, and wary of Lois's abrasive approach, Clark took the lead, "I'm Clark Kent. This is Lois Lane. We're with the Daily Planet."

Recognizing the name of the paper, Ms. Sherman was shocked, and it was apparent in her voice as she said, "I'm Carol Sherman, EPA Field Liaison. What's a newspaper like yours doing here?"

Seeing that he was getting somewhere, Clark smiled and replied, "That's why we're called the Daily Planet. We cover the world."

Not to be left out, Lois added, "And that includes ... Smallville."

Now realizing who she was dealing with, Ms. Sherman replied, basically repeating what had been in the press release, "What you're seeing here is an ecological risk assessment. During the sixties, the owner used a lot of pesticides and we're concerned about seepage into the local ground water."

"I beg to differ with you, Ms. Sherman. I happen to know Wayne Irig and I know that he has never used excessive amounts of pesticides."

"Mr. Kent ..."

At Clark's nod she continued, "Mr. Kent, you don't look old enough to have been around when the pesticide use would have occurred, and therefore you can have no first-hand knowledge. The EPA received a tip about pesticide use and we are here to investigate the claim. The final analysis will show whether or not the report was founded."

Going along with it, Lois quipped, "If your analysis shows positive then he was giving the people more than they bargained for at the dinner table?"

Not picking up on Lois's sarcasm, Ms. Sherman replied, "That's it. Public safety. No big story, I'm afraid."

Lois, sensing a cover-up and becoming more intent on the story, said, "We'll need to speak with the property owner."

Unfazed, Ms. Sherman replied, "Mister Irig's been given relocation money during the testing. He didn't say where he would be going."

Pointedly, Lois replied, "I'm sure you've got that information somewhere. We'll check back." She grabbed Clark's arm and pulled him back toward the car. As they were walking she said, "I think the big impact here is probably that 'Farmer Jones' is off in some motel, eating take-out and watching cable TV on the government's dime. What impact could pesticide use in the sixties have on the crops being produced today?"

"Some of the older pesticides had a long residual."

At Lois's questioning look, he explained, "They didn't break down quickly in the environment. They lasted for many years, unlike those being produced today which break down, most of the time, within weeks of application. That's why they have to be reapplied so often."

"Oh, I think I see. So, some of the pesticides from the sixties could actually still be in the soil? So farmer Jones could actually be poisoning the people that eat his produce?"

Clark was opening his door to climb in and was indignant at her insinuation and it was evident in his voice. “His name happens to be Wayne Irig!” he said as he sat down. “I don’t believe that Wayne did it.”

Lois, embarrassed at her faux pas, said, “Oh, that’s right, you know him, don’t you?” <He is really defensive of people, especially those he knows and likes. That is a good quality in a man. Come to think of it, he’s defended me more than a few times. Not that I really needed defending ... well, maybe I did at that. Now that I think about it, that was sweet of him and I have never really thanked him.>

Clark, somewhat mollified replied, “He’s a friend of my dad’s. I remember that before his wife died, they used to give out these great caramel apples at Halloween.”

Lois was not usually silent; especially so since they had started this trip she had been as prickly as a porcupine. Her displeasure had been coming out as snide remarks and when she didn’t respond to his statement, he was curious, “Okay, what happened to the joke?”

Lois asked innocently, “What joke?”

Clark confronted her, “You’ve made fun of everything else. Let’s hear the caramel apple joke.”

Lois replied in a childlike voice and with a wistful air as if remembering a happy thought, “There is no joke. I **love** caramel apples.” <I guess that is something we have in common.>

“Oh. You had caramel apples in Canada?” Clark just shook his head. Here he had thought that he knew all there was to know about Lois Lane only to find out that he still had a lot to learn and he was having fun doing so.

“Of course we had caramel apples in Canada. It’s not a third world country, you know. We could drive there in just a few hours.”

Before they drove off, Clark attracted Lois’s attention to the property. “Lois, did you notice just where they are taking their samples?”

“Not really. Why? Is that important?”

“If they are checking for pesticide residues, they should be taking their samples from the fields, where the pesticides would have been used. They were working mostly in the yard.”

“Hey, you’re right. If this was a legitimate EPA operation, why would they be doing that? There might just be a story here after all. I wonder what they are really up to.”

Lois and Clark had very easily fallen back into investigative reporter mode and her enthusiasm for the story had grown as they had talked. Lois said, “I need to call the Planet. I want Jimmy to pull the list of EPA sites and fax it to me. Where is the nearest fax?”

“My folks have one.”

She was surprised, but said, “Good. That’s good.”

Herb commented, “What Lois and Clark didn’t know was that, yes, it was Trask and he had Wayne Irig in the command tent. As soon as they drove away, Ms. Sherman reported to Trask. They would have been surprised if they could have looked in on what was happening.”

If they could have, they would have seen that the elusive Wayne Irig was in one of the tents, bound in a chair. He was the object of attention of a man wearing military fatigues, a man by the name of Jason Trask, the paranoid leader of the renegade UFO organization, Bureau 39. Several of his agents were standing guard and they were all heavily armed. A strong, hot light was shining into Irig’s sweaty face.

As the good cop, Trask was using an ingratiating tone of voice, trying to get Irig to give him the information he sought. “We have two possibilities. Either you buried it somewhere on

your farm or you gave it to someone. Now, which is it?” It was readily apparent that Trask hadn’t watched enough police dramas because he was attempting to play both the good cop as well as the bad and it just wasn’t working.

Wayne, by his continued recalcitrance, was demonstrating just how stubborn a Kansas farmer could be. “There weren’t no more. That’s it, all there was.”

Trask wasn’t buying it. His expression morphed from ingratiating and persuasive to anger. He changed the angle of the light so that it was directly in Wayne’s eyes. He could see the beads of perspiration on Wayne’s face under the bright light. Then Trask lunged over the table and grabbed Wayne’s arms in a tight grip. He brought his face within inches of Wayne’s and he almost shouted, “Wrong answer!”

After watching Lois and Clark depart, Sherman knew that she needed to report the encounter to her boss, Trask. She headed for Trask’s headquarters, which was in the other tent. As soon as she entered she saw Wayne Irig, the man she had been told had left. The shock was evident on her face as she stopped, dead in her tracks.

Trask noted a change in his guard, and standing, turned to see Sherman as she stopped just inside the tent flap.

Trask asked, “Is there a problem, Ms. Sherman?”

Indicating Wayne Irig, she said, “You told me he had been **relo*cat*ed.*”

In a sarcastic tone Trask replied, “He has been. **This** is his new location.”

Sherman was not sanguine with this answer. She challenged, “Since when does the Environmental Protection Agency do interrogations?”

Smugly, Trask replied, “It doesn’t, but Bureau 39 does.”

This revelation was a surprise to Sherman. Stunned, she asked, “Bureau 39? What’s Bureau 39?”

Trask became more businesslike, straightening his posture and placing his hands behind his back, like a soldier at parade rest, and sternly replied, “That information is strictly on a need to know basis, and you don’t.”

Sherman came to a decision. She said, “I needed a job, but not this bad. I won’t be a part of this.”

With a malevolent stare, Trask continued, “Ms. Sherman, I’d reconsider that if I were you. No one **alive** has ever quit Bureau 39. It’s a ... a curse.” He started to smile, but the smile never reached his eyes. Sherman decided that it was the most evil smile she had ever seen. He continued, “You did say you had a daughter to raise, didn’t you, but if you’re determined to leave, I’ll accept your ... resignation ... with regrets.” As he finished speaking, he looked at one of his guards.

Sherman saw Trask’s look and she looked at the guard. When she did, she saw that he was slowly reaching for a weapon. She tensed and felt cold chills run up and down her spine. She quailed and said, “No, I’m fine.”

She was watching the guard as she said this, and seeing him relax, she released the breath she didn’t even realize she had been holding.

“Good choice,” Trask spat out and then said in a more businesslike tone, “Well, then, I assume there was something else you came to tell me.”

She had been watching the guard like a rodent watching a snake that was about to strike, and snapping out of her stupor at the question, said, “I just talked to two reporters. Lois Lane and Clark Kent from the Daily Planet. They were just outside.”

Hearing this report, Trask was at first surprised and then that malevolent smile of his returned. Then he said, “Oh, perfect. If they’re here, Superman can’t be far behind.” Almost as an afterthought, he said, “Thank you. You may go.”

When Lois and Clark drove away from the Irig farm they

headed into town. When they reached the town center, Lois found a place to park right on Main Street. Looking around Lois saw that the Corn Festival was still underway.

As they were exiting the car, Clark told Lois, “If Mr. Irig’s around, somebody here will know about it. That’s the great thing about a small town. Maybe I should ask Rachel.”

Lois was surprised by the sparks of jealousy that suddenly hit her when he said this and she blurted out, “Why not ask someone else?”

As she was finishing speaking, there was a shout from across the way, “Clark!” A redhead ran up and threw her arms around Clark. He was without his powers, so he wasn’t able to react quickly enough to stop her as she, without asking permission, planted her lips on his. When she pulled back, Clark disengaged himself and looked at Lois apologetically.

Lois was looking daggers at this new woman. The sparks of jealousy she had felt moments ago at the mention of Rachel had suddenly been fanned into a blazing inferno by seeing this woman kiss Clark.

Stepping back, next to Lois, Clark finally was able to perform the introductions, “Lana Lang, I’d like you to meet Lois Lane, my fiancée.” He turned to Lois and tried to explain, “Lana is sort of ... my ... ex.”

Lana’s face fell, and she gasped out, “Fiancée?”

“Yes, Lana, fiancée. Lois and I are getting married.”

Lana collected herself. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

Lois supplied, “We made the announcement at the dance last night.”

“I wasn’t there.” She held out her hand and said, “Hi. Pleased to meet you. I was just so happy to see Clark. It’s been so long.”

As she shook her hand, Lois asked, “Ex what?”

Looking at Clark with an unreadable expression, Lana replied, “Well, we were high school sweethearts until I left in our senior year. I went with my father on a dig. He’s an archeologist and my mom had passed away so it was just him and me. You know how it is. When Clark finished college he came back to Smallville, and it just happened that we were here. He looked me up and asked me to marry him.”

“But you told him no.” Lois nodded in understanding. After what Suzanne and Collette had said, and intimated with the nickname they had used for Clark, she now understood. He had been rejected by this woman and he was being extra cautious in any relationships that came after that rejection. The endearment that Suzanne and Collette had used indicated that they had pursued a relationship with him and had been unsuccessful in their attempts. So why was he acquiescing to her demands that he marry her?

“Yeah, fool that I am, I told him no. I was going to be doing more traveling with my father. I think that’s why Clark left on his world travels.” She had been looking back and forth between Lois and Clark. Now she centered her attention on Lois as she said, “My, you two are getting married, so I guess he’s told you all about himself.”

“I’m still learning what there is to know. There’s a lot to learn.”

“You don’t have to pretend with me. I know.”

“Know what?”

This answer unsettled Lana. She looked at Clark accusingly and asked, “You haven’t told her yet, have you?”

“It hasn’t come up, yet.”

“But I thought you said ...” She stopped abruptly and pulled Clark out of Lois’s hearing before she said, “I thought you told me that you would only marry someone after they knew about you, about what you could do.”

Somewhat sheepishly, Clark replied, “Yes, I did, but this is a different situation.”

“Okay, if you say so.” Lana gave Lois a wary eye as she

turned to leave. As she did, she said to both of them, “I’ll be seeing you around.”

As soon as Lana had walked away, Lois asked, “What hasn’t come up? What do I need to know? Is it something that Mr. Ramsbottom will ask about?”

Clark tried to deflect her by saying, “Oh, I don’t think he’d ask about this, it’s something personal. I’ll tell you at ... the proper time.”

Lois challenged, “When will it be the proper time?”

“I’m not sure just yet, but when it is, we’ll both know it.”

“Why can’t you tell me now?”

Clark stuck to his guns and replied, “Because the right time hasn’t occurred as yet. We’ll both know when it is the right time.”

Lois let out a gasp, “Wow! That was a close one. Lana almost gave away The Secret.”

“Clark may have been able to cover it because right then he was powerless,” pointed out Clark. “But she brought up a good point. Clark’s going to have to tell her sometime and soon.”

“Right you are. Right then he didn’t have his powers so it would be difficult for anyone to prove that he was Superman, especially him, but he did need to tell her.”

Chapter 11

Lois and Clark spent the balance of the day looking for information about Wayne Irig’s farm and his whereabouts.

Some comments that had been made had piqued Lois’s interest. When they had been reporting partners, they had started getting close. She had to admit to herself that she had gotten closer to him than anyone else in her life. That had actually scared her and was part of the reason that she had been so aggressive in the editor’s office, finally relegating Clark to a position not much better than executive assistant. It felt safer that way. Now, with this situation, that was changing, again. Suddenly they were reporting partners again and they were getting married. What had she been thinking? She had put herself back in the situation that she had worked so hard to get herself out of. Again she was getting close to Clark and if she wasn’t careful, this entire situation would blow up in her face. What if ... what if he decided that he wanted to consummate the wedding? Would she be able to go along with that? He might feel like he was entitled to just that.

Their first stop, after Lois had parked, was City Hall, after which they strolled around town for a bit, asking questions of those people that Clark identified as local residents. Eventually they ended up in Maisie’s Café because she had the best burgers in Lowell County. Clark led Lois to an empty booth and stood as he waited for her to sit down.

Even though Lois was in a grumpy mood because of what had happened outside, she noted Clark waiting for her and thought, <Ever the perfect gentleman. If we were sitting at a table, I’m sure he would hold my chair for me. So sweet. How can I stay mad at him? But, what he said!> Looking around she thought, <This place looks like something out of Norman Rockwell. Red and white vinyl checkered table cloth, sugar container, salt and pepper shakers, and a *ketchup* bottle, like ketchup is the only condiment you would want.>

Lois dug into her bag, pulled out her cell phone, and threw it carelessly on the table. She reached in again and this time found what she had been after, her notebook and pencil.

While she was doing this, Clark grabbed a potato chip and crunched on it, then said, “All right, four hours at City Hall and all we know is that in twenty years, there were no permits and no citations issued on the Irig property.”

She slammed her pad down on the table, interrupting him. No matter how nice he was, the incident outside was still digging at her. She crossed her arms on the table and gave him a look that he recognized as irritation.

He asked, “What’s the matter?” and then crunched another chip.

In an irritated tone which matched her look as she mocked him, “Don’t mind my friend, *Lois*. She’s from *Metropolis*.”

Clark leaned across the table and said, quietly, “You were coming off as a little ... ‘intense’.”

Defensively, Lois replied, “Look Clark, intensity might be a crime in Smallville, but in Montreal and Metropolis, well, maybe not so much in Montreal, but in Metropolis it’s a survival skill.”

“This isn’t either Montreal or Metropolis. You need to learn to relax some.”

Shaking her head in disbelief, Lois flipped to a fresh page and started to write. She spoke to herself as she wrote, “No activity that would attract the attention of the federal government.”

She was interrupted by the arrival of Maisie, a good-looking, blond, middle-aged waitress who placed a couple of Dixie cups of ice water on the table.

As Maisie was placing the water on the table, she recognized who it was that was sitting in the booth, and in a happy tone said, “Clark Kent! Your mom *said* you were here for the Corn Festival.” Pointedly she looked at Lois and gave her a sharp appraisal. She wiped her hand on her apron to dry it before offering it to Lois and said, “So this *must* be Lois. I heard that you announced your engagement last night at the dance. Glad to finally meet ya.” Without missing a beat, she turned to Clark and said, “Your parents must be really happy. Here it is, their anniversary weekend and you announce your engagement.” She released an audible sigh and said, “And that kiss, just everybody is talking about that kiss, so romantic.”

By this time Lois had become accustomed to everyone knowing who she was and about the engagement. She was blushing at the memory of the kiss as she said, “I guess it was, wasn’t it?”

Recovering from her romantic haze, Maisie pressed on, “I’m Maisie. How’s the writing coming? I’d just love to read a good romance novel.”

Lois just couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Her novel was one of her deepest darkest secrets. She hadn’t done any work on it since taking the editor’s position. She looked daggers at Clark, and if looks could kill, Clark, especially in his present condition, would have died a thousand deaths.

Clark had just reached into a basket of chips, and taking one, placed it in his mouth. When Lois turned to glare at him, he crunched down on it. Chagrined, Clark swallowed and then tried to make an excuse, “I must have,” he cleared his throat, “accidentally ... mentioned it to ... my mom. She may have ...”

Lois almost growled as she finished for him, “Accidentally told the whole town.”

Maisie could see what was brewing and it wasn’t the coffee. There was a storm brewing and it was her fault. Hoping that she hadn’t done something to break them up, she tried to defuse the situation, “Oh, that’s just Smallville for you, honey. Everybody knows everything about everybody else.”

Lois was quick to pick up on that. It fit right in with her desires. She needed to learn all that she could about Clark so that she could pass Mr. Ramsbottom’s little test. Maybe there was something that Clark had left out of that binder. He had left out the information on his allergies, after all. Maybe there were other things, like whatever it was that Lana was talking about. She also wanted to know if Clark was for real. Claude had been a fake, a fraud that had cheated her, who had tried, at Ralph’s instigation, to seduce her, and had actually stolen her story. She needed to know if Clark was like that or not. Here was Maisie giving her the perfect opening. She stared straight at Clark as she asked, sweetly, “If that’s so, why haven’t I heard any dirt on Clark, here?”

Maisie looked back and forth between Clark and Lois. She felt that Lois was giving her an opportunity to correct whatever

problem she had created by mentioning the novel, so finally she returned her eyes to look at Lois, and she answered her question in a very sincere tone and with a straightforward manner, “Honey, I’ve known Clark all of his life. You can take it from me ... with Clark, here ... what you see ... is what you get. He’s *always* been Mr. Straight Arrow.” Taking a couple of menus out of the pocket of her apron, she handed them to Lois and Clark and then hearing another customer calling said, “Here you go. I’ll be back in a jiff.”

As if this was a big revelation, Lois repeated in an almost mocking tone, “What you see is what you get, huh?” However, Maisie’s statement had started a chain reaction of thoughts and emotions within Lois, and after Maisie turned away, Lois took a close look at Clark with a new appreciation. She was thinking about what Clark had said at the dance. Was it all part of the act, or was he being serious? She had suspected that Clark was attracted to her. Could what he said have been true? Did he really love her? If that kiss had been any indication ... After a few seconds of this contemplation, she looked at her menu.

While Maisie had been speaking, Clark had reached for the pad and started reading. As Maisie walked away, he flipped back to Lois’s notes. As he did, he let out an exclamation, “Ow!” Surprised and confused, he looked at his finger. It was cut and bleeding. He was thinking, <How did I get cut? Oh, no, I’m not only weak, I’m ... vulnerable. That actually hurt. That rock!> Out loud, in a shocked tone, he said, “I’m ... bleeding!”

Looking up from her menu, Lois asked, “Haven’t you ever had a paper cut before?” <Why is he acting like such a big baby? You’d think he wasn’t used to being hurt.>

Still staring at the blood seeping from his finger in fascination, he said, “Not that I can remember.”

Half distractedly as she was trying to decide what to order, she said, “Put it in your mouth, Clark, and suck on it.”

Following Lois’s orders, Clark put his finger in his mouth and sucked on it.

After lunch they returned to the farm and found that the fax had come in. After looking the fax over, Lois almost shouted, “Look at this!” She shook the paper from the fax in his face as she said, “This is a working list of clean-up sites from the Environmental Protection Agency, and guess what?” Not waiting for them to answer, she continued in an I-told-you-so tone, “Smallville’s *not* on it. I think we might be onto something here. Let’s go, Clark.”

“Where?”

“The Irig farm, of course. I want another chance at that Ms. Sherman.”

In typical Mad Dog Lane fashion, as soon as they rolled to a stop, Lois jumped out of the car and approached the barrier to confront Ms. Sherman.

Carol Sherman had seen them as they drove up and had moved to intercept them at the barrier.

As they exited the car, Lois had seen her approaching and had hastened to meet her. She was therefore between Sherman and Clark as he rounded the back of the car, bent slightly, and attempted unsuccessfully to lift the back end by hooking his hand under the bumper. Once he was sure he couldn’t lift it, shaking his head in disappointment, he followed Lois.

As he approached, Lois was confronting Ms. Sherman with the list of active EPA sites that they had received. As soon as she was at the barrier, Lois had addressed Sherman, “It seems that Smallville is not on the EPA list!”

The previous day, unknowingly, Sherman had been lying. Now she was doing it deliberately, because her life depended on it. She knew that she had to play the part flawlessly if she was to live to see her daughter again. Playing the officious bureaucrat she

said, “Look, if you want to match paperwork we can do that.” She was thankful Trask had thought of this possibility and prepared her for it. She began flipping through official-looking documents on a clipboard that she held. Finding the ones she was looking for, she started the litany, “This is our certificate granting access to EPA Superfund status.” She flipped to the next page, “This is the property rights waiver.” Turning over yet another page, she said, “Here’s the authorization from Smallville City Hall.” She flipped to the final page, “And this ... this is the *up*dated list of what you’ve got. See? There’s Smallville right there.” She pointed at a line item on a list.

Clark was now close enough to see the forms. The sheet she was pointing to sure looked a lot like the one Lois had, and sure enough, there was ‘Smallville’ right where she indicated. He said, “She’s right, Lois.”

Refusing to give up that easily, Lois asked, “May I see those?”

Ms. Sherman said, “Sure.” Hoping that the forged documents would hold up under Lois’s scrutiny, she handed the clipboard over.

Clark was now sure there was a problem here. While Lois was looking at the forms and comparing them, Clark slipped his glasses down his nose and tried to use his x-ray vision to see what was in the tents, but he failed in the attempt. In fact there was actually pain associated with the attempt. With a disgusted grunt, berating himself for failing to do that the previous day, he pushed his glasses back up his nose.

Seeing that the fakes seemed to be fooling Lois, Sherman, feeling on solid ground, began to elaborate on the story, “It always takes Washington about six weeks to figure out what the people in the field are up to. I can make a call if you like.” This was pure bluff and she knew it, but she had less to lose if Lois figured it out than if Trask was displeased.

Lois was angry at being thwarted like this and it showed in her voice as she replied, “Do that. And while you’re at it, we definitely want to talk to Mister Irig.”

Somewhat exasperated, Sherman replied, “I told you. He’s been relocated during the disruption.” Now, unlike the previous day, she knew this was a lie, but she had to follow through with it, or else.

Lois challenged, “But you didn’t tell us where.”

Sherman was becoming exasperated and it came out in her voice as she replied, in a strained tone, “Because I don’t know. Probably one of the motels.”

Lois started to smile like the cat that had just caught the canary, because she knew she had Sherman. The inside knowledge she had gained by being with the Kents was now going to pay off, big time. She challenged, “I doubt it. Most of the rooms around here were booked up months in advance, or maybe you’ve never heard of the famous Smallville Corn Festival.” She smiled in triumph.

Sherman realized that she had been caught and had to come up with an explanation, but all she could come up with was, “The government has pull.”

Going for the kill, Lois challenged, “All right, then, which one?”

Sherman decided that she would need to bluff this pushy woman again, “I don’t know. I’ll try to find out.” She hoped that the stall would make them leave. She turned and headed for the tents.

She was disappointed when Lois shouted after her, “We’ll wait.”

Ms. Sherman was worried. Her skin crawled each time she had to meet with Trask, but she had no choice. These pushy reporters were forcing her hand. As she entered the command tent she saw Trask watching as a couple of his guards unloaded a crate which had *39/ULTRA* stenciled on the outside. The markings

meant absolutely nothing to her, but she noted it nonetheless. She decided to get this over with as quickly as possible. Knowing that he would know exactly who she was speaking about, she said simply, “They’re back.”

Trask transferred his attention to her long enough to ask, “And ...”

“I think they believe me, but they still want to see Irig.”

“Tell them that he’ll be in touch.” He dismissed her by turning his back on her and returning to the unpacking.

Sherman was about to exit with that message, but she was not satisfied with this response. She said, “Look. If I’m involved in this, I have to know what’s at stake, in order to do my job.”

Trask turned back around and faced her again. After a moments consideration he said, “Fair enough. I have reason to believe there’s a very important *meteorite* here in Smallville.”

Sherman was even more surprised at this answer. She blurted out, “Meteorite? Why do you need to keep it such a secret?”

Trask, as if explaining the concept that $2 + 2 = 4$ to a two-year-old, said, “Because if I don’t, I will lose the element of surprise over Superman.”

Startled and confused at the mention of Superman, Sherman asked, “What’s Superman got to do with this?”

She was looking at Trask, but Sherman could see that behind him, the guards had succeeded in removing the top of the crate.

Gesturing at the crate behind him, Trask answered, “This, Ms. Sherman, was retrieved by my predecessor, in Smallville, Kansas in 1966, not far from here.”

As he finished speaking, without the top holding them in place, the sides of the crate finally fell away and there was revealed to her sight a small spacecraft. On the nose she saw a familiar sigil, the same symbol that she had seen on the chest of the superhero. Her surprise at the sight that met her eyes caused her to take a gasping breath.

Trask continued to speak while Sherman stared at the small craft, “The meteorite probably landed here at the same time but wasn’t discovered until a recent storm. It seems reasonable to assume that it comes from the same source as Superman. The planet Krypton. It’s all in this report here.” Picking up a folder from the table with official type markings “*FOUO — TOP SECRET*” and opening it, he rifled through some sheets of paper, and finding the correct one, started to read, “Not of Earthly origin. Periodic element 126. Emits an extremely high band radiation that doesn’t seem to affect humans.” As he finished reading Trask was smiling. He closed the folder and looked up at Sherman. “However, my theory is that if a *Kryptonian* were to be exposed to a significant piece for any length of time, the result could be ... lethal.” He smiled that very unpleasant smile.

Sherman was shocked at the thought that anyone would wish to harm the superhero. All he had done was help mankind. She challenged, “But why kill Superman? He hasn’t done anything *hostile*.”

Sherman was shocked by the look in Trask’s eyes. It was the light of fanaticism or insanity, and she couldn’t tell which.

With total conviction Trask said, “His very *existence* is hostile. He’s the ad*van*ce man ... the public re*la*tions guy. He’s here to soften us up ... for the hordes to come. *Now* do you understand?”

Yes, now she understood, only too well. Now that Sherman had heard this directly from Trask she knew which it was. The man was insane, a maniac, and she was beginning to have serious doubts that she would actually survive this job. If all of the guards that worked for him were as mad as he was, her hours, let alone days, were numbered. All she could do was play along and hope for the best. Maybe she could escape or else be rescued. She returned to the barrier and relayed the message to the reporters.

Lois gave Sherman her cell phone number and then she and Clark headed for the car. Lois asked, “Are you hungry, Clark?”

Nodding his head, Clark said, “I could use a bite to eat.” He wasn’t extremely hungry. Usually he derived most of his energy from sunlight, but ever since being exposed to that rock, he had needed to eat and drink to keep up his energy.

With the air of one forming a plan, Lois said, “Let’s go into town. Maybe we can find someone who knows something for a change before we eat.”

The day was bright and sunny and for once Lois took her time driving, which gave them plenty of opportunity to talk and for Clark to soak up some sunlight.

They headed back into town and returned to Maisie’s diner. They sat at a table and, as Maisie deposited a couple of cups of ice water and a couple of menus on the table, ordered coffee.

Lois started to reach for a menu as Maisie turned to get their orders, but as she did, Lois’s cell phone began to ring. Forgetting about the menu, Lois reached for it.

Clark also reached for it.

It was inevitable that as Lois reached for the phone she would knock over one of the glasses of ice water and it would naturally land in Clark’s lap. It was impossible to tell if it was an accident or deliberate. However it happened, suddenly Clark’s pants were wet and he was cold, something he hadn’t experienced in years, not since he had been a kid. Jumping up from his seat he started to frantically brush off the water to prevent any more from soaking into his pants.

While he was doing this Lois picked up the phone, looked at him and said, “Oops, sorry.” She flipped the phone open and, extending the antenna, answered it. “This is Lois Lane.” Hearing the voice on the phone she blurted out, “Mr. Irig? Where are you?”

He responded, “I think I’m just outside of Salt Lake City.”

Incredulous, Lois repeated what he had said for clarification, “Salt Lake City?!?”

Wayne replied, “I just got in my Winnebago and decided to go visit my sister. Been on the road so long, hardly know where I am.”

Lois didn’t like what she was hearing. It just didn’t sound right. She said, “Mister Irig, I’m going to put you on with Clark Kent.”

She handed the phone to Clark and he immediately brought it to his ear and spoke, “Hello, Wayne. Can you give me a phone number where I can call you back?”

For a few seconds there was silence and then he was back, “I don’t see one here. I’m at a truck stop.”

Clark was practically shouting, the connection seemed to be really bad and Wayne sounded really confused. Clark persisted with, “What did the EPA guys tell you about the work they’re doing on your property?”

Wayne replied, “Just that they needed to do some digging.”

Worried, because Wayne’s answers seemed to be rather wooden, Clark asked, “Wayne, is everything okay?”

Wayne’s reply was not really convincing, “There’s no problem. Looks like somebody else needs this phone now. Goodbye, Clark.”

As Clark shouted, “Wha, wait, Wayne I . . .” the line went dead.

In the command tent on the Irig farm, Trask took the field phone from Wayne’s hand and dropped it onto its pouch as a telephone operator hit a switch on a field switchboard to kill the connection.

The guards that had been standing around started to relax.

Trask then took the index cards which he had used to write out the script that Wayne had followed. He was irritated that Wayne had started to improvise, but then there hadn’t been much choice. Trask hadn’t anticipated every possible question. He actually thought that the Winnebago was a nice touch.

In a questioning tone, Clark said, “Salt Lake City?”

“That’s where he said he was calling from. He couldn’t wait to get off the line, could he?”

Shaking his head, Clark said, “Wayne’s never been much of a talker.”

Thoughtfully, Lois said, “He said he was calling from Salt Lake City, but he could have been . . . anywhere.”

Picking up on where Lois was taking this train of thought, he suggested, “You mean like here in Smallville.” Looking at Lois he asked, “What did he say to you?”

“He said that he had just decided to visit his sister, hopped into his Winnebago and started driving.”

With a shocked expression, Clark said, “I think you’re right and he was giving us a clue.”

“Huh, what do you mean?”

“Wayne doesn’t *own* a Winnebago.”

With a nod of dawning understanding, Lois said, “It sure looks like it is possible.” Looking out the window and across the street at the Corn Festival activities, Lois said, “I’d suggest that we go mingle, but I’d like one of Maisie’s burgers and a chocolate shake first. Real ice cream, yum.”

Clark commented, “That was different, Wayne never dropped a clue like that to us. In our universe, Wayne had a Winnebago so that wouldn’t have worked. Wayne is a tough old farmer. I think Trask has met his match. Wayne can outlast him.”

Lois commented, “So far it’s a lot like what happened to us.”

Herb replied, “I believe that when the events of the two universes parallel the similarities will outweigh the differences. In this case, even though the source of the encounter was from a different cause, the events that followed were strikingly similar. Although, when you come right down to it, the outcome was more like that of the other couple I mentioned.”

Clark commented, “You’ve mentioned them a few times now. When are you going to tell us about them?”

Herb smiled and said, “Ah, yes. That would be another interesting story to tell, but that is for another time. Let me just say that they put their Luthor in prison and he will be there for a very long time, a very long time, indeed. Unlike what happened to you, that Lois, with Martha’s help, managed to recapture Luthor after he escaped from the police and prevented him from leaping from the balcony.” (see House of Luthor – Matchmaker Style.)

Chapter 12

As soon as they left Maisie’s Diner they could hear the music from the gazebo, and they followed that as they crossed the street to the square. Stepping onto the square, they found themselves on the outskirts of a crowd which was cheering on an athletic competition. Lois shouted to make herself heard over the cheering crowd, “What’s going on? Is it a prize fight?”

Clark shook his head, and placing his lips near her ear so that she could hear him, he said, “No, this is a husk-off.”

Pulling away, she gave him a mystified look.

He moved close again and said, “Teams try to see who can shuck the most ears in a minute!”

Again she moved away. This time she shouted, “This is a team sport?”

Clark nodded his head enthusiastically.

Lois just rolled her eyes in response.

When they left the area of the competition they saw Clark’s mom and dad. Lois and Clark moved over to join them. Lois said, “Look, Clark, you still look like your allergies are bothering you. Why don’t you sit a while with your parents and I’ll mingle.” Without waiting for him to answer, Lois moved off, notebook in hand.

After he joined them, they found a picnic table that was

unoccupied and sat down. They were all watching Lois as she moved off and started talking to people, Jonathan said, “That girl never stops working, does she?” Then he turned to Clark and lowered his voice. “About that rock, maybe those Feds’ll look for a while up at Irig’s and when they can’t find it, just give up. Then she’ll give up on the story.”

“I doubt it, Dad. We just spoke with Wayne. Dad, he lied to us, but I think he did it deliberately. We think he’s in trouble.”

Jonathan was shocked, “What kind of trouble?”

“There’s no way to tell. He cut the conversation short. He tried to tell us he was in Salt Lake City, but we don’t believe it.”

“Salt Lake City? I don’t think so. He wouldn’t have had enough time to cover the distance.”

“We didn’t think so either, especially in a non-existent Winnebago.”

Hearing this, Martha was even more concerned about Clark’s physical state because she knew that his powers might be needed. She said, “If you’re going into a dangerous situation, we’ve got to get you to a doctor, that’s all there is to it.”

Clark replied, “Mom, what’s a doctor going to do? I’m fine now. Fine... but I’m normal.”

Martha rebutted, “Normal for Earth.”

Clark replied, “But this **is** Earth. Normal could be good.” Looking around, Clark realized that he had lost sight of Lois. He didn’t think it would be a big deal — after all, what could happen here in town? — but that didn’t keep him from worrying about her.

Jonathan added his two cents, “I think you’re both jumping the gun. You can’t go all your life with powers and then, poof, they just disappear.”

Clark replied, “Well, It’s happened, Dad.” Looking around he spotted a test of strength attraction. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

As they approached, a girl was just accepting a pink Teddy Bear from the barker that her date had won for her.

The barker shouted, “Ring the bell ... win a prize!”

Clark stepped up to the device and, in return for a ticket, the barker handed him a wooden sledge hammer.

Looking at the test of strength, he saw that the bottom level read ‘Wimp’ and then scaled up to the top, which used to call you ‘Top Dog’ if you rang the bell, but those words had been crossed out and it now declared you to be a ‘Superman’.

Clark said over his shoulder to his mom and dad, “Here goes!” Clark gave a lusty swing and a grunt. The hammer came crashing down on the lever, but the weight only rose to the level of ‘Better Luck Next Time’.

The barker asked, “Want to give it another shot?”

With a dispirited air, shaking his head, Clark handed the hammer back to the barker and said, “No thanks. That was enough humiliation for one day.”

Martha and Jonathan watched this display with obvious concern and then they exchanged worried looks.

Just then, Lois walked up, and obviously having seen what happened and trying to be sympathetic she said, “Don’t worry about it. Maybe you should try corn husking instead.”

Much later, toward evening, Lois was eating a caramel apple as they wandered around a bit, talking of the investigation that they found themselves in. Finally they were approaching the test of strength booth where Clark had failed so miserably earlier in the day.

With a look of pure orneriness, Lois said, “Okay, Clark, let’s make this a day to remember,” and pulling out a ticket, she handed it to the barker. Lois said, “Here you go, sir,” as she handed him the ticket. In return the barker handed the hammer to Clark.

Clark looked at Lois and then at the hammer and said, “Oh, no! You know I didn’t do well with this earlier.”

Lois was strongly convinced that things would turn out

differently this time; in fact, she was sure of it, so she encouraged him, “Come on, Clark. It’s only a ticket. What do you have to lose? Give it a shot.”

Her encouragement helped him overcome his fears and he hefted the hammer. It was still something of a struggle for him to wield it. The result, however, was encouraging. As they watched, the weight climbed to ‘Better Luck Next Time’ and kept going, pausing at the ‘Hercules’ level before falling back down. The realization that he had spent most of the day in the sun hit him and encouraged him.

Lois was clapping enthusiastically at his performance, and with that encouragement he pulled another ticket from his back pocket, and asked as he handed it to the barker, “Can I try that again?”

He took a good wind-up and whacked the pedal a good stroke. The weight passed ‘Hercules’ and reduced the distance between that and ‘Superman’ by half.

Lois pulled out another ticket and said in an upbeat tone, “Okay, that was very close. One more,” as she handed the barker another ticket.

A swing and a grunt and this time the weight traveled the distance and with a loud ‘clang’ rang the bell! Clark was surprised and pleased. <My strength must be returning.> Dropping the hammer, he threw his arms up in victory.

When the bell rang, Lois squealed in delight and jumping up and down, clapped her hands. She shouted, “You did it! I knew you could do it!” Pointing at the top of the bar she declared, “You’re my Superman!”

The next thing that happened was an even bigger surprise to Clark. The barker picked up two toys, a Superman doll and a black and white Teddy Bear with a red ribbon around his neck. He said, “You get your choice.”

Clark was chagrined at the choices she was being offered and deep down in his gut he was sure he knew what her choice would be. Her infatuation with his alter ego made the choice almost inevitable. Her hesitation as she looked back and forth, weighing the options made him even more certain of the eventual outcome, but to his total surprise, as she reached for and took the bear she said, “I already have my Superman. I’ll take the bear.”

Clark smiled at her statement. Things were looking up. Just maybe this marriage wouldn’t be as short as she had planned.

They had gone back to the farm after that. Clark had driven while Lois played with her black and white teddy bear. Martha and Jonathan were already there. Lois was still cuddling her bear as they walked in.

Spotting the bear, Martha asked, “Did Clark win that for you?”

Lois was smiling as she wrapped her free arm around Clark’s, and leaning her head on his shoulder, she gushed, “Yes! He rang the bell. My Superman.”

A relieved look came over the faces of both Martha and Jonathan as they realized what that meant: Clark’s powers must be returning.

Lois yawned, and pulling on Clark’s arm, said, “Well, it’s been a big day. I think we’ll head off to bed. Come on, Clark, bedtime,” and started dragging him toward the stairs.

“Right, Lois. I’m with you. Goodnight, Mom and Dad.”

“Goodnight, son... and Lois.”

“Goodnight,” Lois said over her shoulder.

This time, the last thing she did before settling in bed was to place her new teddy bear on a dresser. Then she moved to the bed and as Clark was settling himself on the floor, her mood was different. She started talking. “You know, there are a lot of things that your binder didn’t cover.”

“Oh, like what?”

“Well, for one thing, did you know that I love ‘The Ivory

Tower”? It’s my favorite program.”

“Actually, I didn’t know that.”

“See? My favorite ice cream is chocolate, chocolate chip.”

He interrupted her and said, “That one I knew. If you recall, I made sure I had that handy when you were over at my place for late-night story meetings. And your favorite soda is cream soda. I still have a six-pack of those in my fridge.”

After a few seconds, Lois changed the topic, “Clark, who do you think is behind this?”

“I don’t know, but I’m pretty well convinced that it isn’t the EPA. I think we need to call Perry in the morning. See what he wants us to do.”

“I guess you’re right. You know, this actually feels good.”

“Yeah, that is a comfy bed.”

“No, not the bed. I mean working together again; investigating. I’ve missed it.” She said in a wistful tone.

In a heartfelt tone, he replied, “So have I, Lois, so have I.”

After a few seconds of quiet contemplation, Lois said, softly, “Goodnight, Clark,” and reached to douse the light.

“Goodnight, Lois.”

As if the dousing of the light had been a signal, a few seconds later they were both on their feet. Lois shouted, “What’s that racket?”

Out in the yard, directly under the window of Clark’s room, stood Pete Ross, Billy Eck, Rachel, Lana and a number of Clark’s friends from school. They were banging pots and clapping pan lids together like cymbals and doing whatever they could to make noise. It didn’t quiet until the young couple appeared at the window. They had all been able to sneak up on them because Clark had not regained his powers. Throwing up the sash they both stuck their heads and shoulders out of the window and looked down on the crowd.

Lois had been so startled that she had forgotten what she was wearing, and when they showed themselves, if there had been more light, it would have been very evident that she was wearing a sheer nightgown. A cheer went up and then the chant of ‘Kiss her. Kiss her. Kiss her.’ started and it didn’t stop until Clark had kissed Lois again. This time, Lois was less reluctant. Actually, she enjoyed participating, and there was no thought given to what she was wearing. Fortunately, in the dark from below it was hard to see more than two forms in the window, or else Lois would have been mortified at her state of undress.

To a chorus of laughter and clapping the crowd broke up and headed for their various homes, and Lois and Clark retreated back into his room.

Clark still had her in his arms as Lois said, “I’ve heard of the charivari, but I thought that custom had died out long ago.” She had used the French pronunciation.

“Really it did. Occasionally folks will get together and do a chivaree, but usually it’s just close friends, and it is done to display their pleasure. My friends were just showing how pleased they are that I’m getting married.”

Reluctantly, Clark released Lois, and after closing the window again they returned to their respective sleeping spaces.

As she was lying down, Lois said, “You have a lot of nice friends.” Her conscience was starting to bother her and she asked, “Clark?”

“Yes, Lois.”

“Am I messing up your relationships with Rachel... or... Lana? And what about Mayson?”

“No, Lois, you aren’t messing up my relationships. Lana and I had a relationship long ago, but that ended when she said no. Rachel and I dated some, but we really didn’t have a ‘relationship’. Mayson is just a girl I know. I think she likes me, but I’ve never dated her.”

“Do you think you would have a chance with Mayson? If not for me, that is?”

“I never really thought about it. She’s nice, but... I don’t know.”

“If I wasn’t in the picture... If we weren’t getting married, do you think you’d want to date her? Maybe marry her?”

“Lois, you and I are getting married. That means that I don’t think of other women. I don’t speculate about what it would be like if I married one of them.” He thought for a second and then said, “Add this to the binder — I’m a one-woman man. When we are married you will have no fear of my wandering. I’ll be totally devoted to you.”

Lois was silent as she contemplated his statements. Did she really want that? That attitude would make it that much harder when it came time for the divorce. With a sigh, she rolled on her side and closed her eyes.

The next morning they were a little late getting up so Martha made up a tray of coffee and cinnamon rolls and took it up to Lois and Clark.

Not wanting to interrupt anything, she first knocked on the door and announced, with a giggle, “Room service,” as a little joke.

Clark didn’t even stir, but Lois woke up. She hissed, “Clark.” When he didn’t move, she repeated it, “Clark!” When he still didn’t move she took a pillow and threw it at him.

He started up at the impact and Lois hissed, “Your mother is at the door. Get up here.”

He scrambled up, and picking up the pillows and blankets, he joined Lois in the bed.

She was startled by his physical response to being in bed with her and hissed, “Clark!”

He shifted position slightly and said, “Sorry.”

They arranged themselves in bed, cuddling and Lois called, “Okay.”

Martha came in and placed the tray on a side table. She said, “I didn’t want to disturb you, but it was getting late. Jonathan is already doing his chores. I thought you guys would like something to eat.”

Lois made a stretch and said, “That’s so thoughtful of you. Thank you.”

Martha hesitated and then said, “Lois, Jonathan and I have been thinking, your family is all in Canada and you said that it was going to be difficult for them to attend the wedding. We thought that it might be a good idea if...” She paused a second as if preparing for a rebuff, before she continued in a rush, “if the two of you got married here, in Smallville. That way all of Clark’s friends could attend.”

Lois looked at Clark to give herself time to think and then said, “We’re in the middle of this investigation.”

“We know. We could hold the ceremony here, after you finish, or if it’s going to drag on, then before it is finished. You could surely take a little time off from the investigation to have a wedding. Then you could finish it as a married couple. A lot of Clark’s friends came back for the Corn Festival so if we held it, say, tomorrow or the day after, they would be able to be there.”

Lois demurred, “This is all so sudden. We can’t predict how long the investigation will take.”

Martha said, “You’re getting married anyway, so why not here, among friends?”

Lois caved, “Okay. Sounds good. As soon as this investigation is over, or sooner if need be. I’m sure Clark would want all of his friends there.”

Smiling, Martha started rambling, “I think that Sunday would be perfect. That is Jonathan’s and my anniversary. We can share. We’ll take care of everything. We won’t need invitations. We’ll just spread the word. This time of the year the weather can be unpredictable. That’s kind of short notice to reserve the church, so to be on the safe side we can hold it in the barn. We haven’t had

any livestock for years, Jonathan only uses it for the tractor, so there is plenty of room for lots of chairs in there. After the ceremony it would only take a few minutes to set up the tables.” She gave Lois a close perusal and said, “We are almost the same size so I’d like you to try on my wedding gown. Something borrowed, you know.” As she started backing to the door, she said, “I’m so excited. This is going to be fun.”

Forgetting that she was in her shortie nightie, once the door was closed, Lois got up and moved to the table. She poured the coffee and picked up the plate of cinnamon rolls. As she carried it over to Clark, she said, “I need to learn to serve my husband.” Smelling the rolls, she said, “I’m going to have to learn to cook. I don’t want my man leaving me for a woman that can cook.” <What am I saying? I’m acting like this is going to be permanent or something. This is strictly temporary.> Just then she noticed how Clark was looking at her and remembered her attire and started to blush and feel self-conscious. The temptation was to just drop what she was holding and cover herself, but then the thought intruded that she actually liked the way Clark was looking at her. He wasn’t leering at her in a lustful way. He was actually looking at her in a respectful way, and he had been right, he did need to know what she wore to bed.

As he accepted the coffee and plate, he said, “I haven’t left you yet, Lois.”

Once Clark had taken the items, Lois was distracted as she thought about what was about to happen and became overwhelmed. Ignoring the coffee and rolls, she grabbed her clothes and headed to the bathroom to dress. Clark asked, “Where are you going?”

“I need to get dressed so that we can get this investigation done.”

As he took a bite of a cinnamon roll, he mumbled around his mouthful, “Okay, I’ll join you shortly.”

As she left for the bathroom, she replied, “Okay.”

Before they had a chance to leave, Martha had Lois try on her gown. It would not need any hemming, because Martha had been a little more petite than Lois. It was a rather old-fashioned style and Lois wasn’t particularly taken with it. It was also a little tight across the bust and Lois felt squashed. Martha spotted the problem and said, “Oh, it seems a little tight. It looks like I’ll need to let it out some.” Martha was thinking, <I wish it had been made of spandex like Clark’s suit, then there wouldn’t have been a problem.>

Lois put on a smart-looking business suit for the investigation, and when she and Clark came downstairs, they called Perry.

“Hi, Perry, it’s Lois and Clark. We hope you aren’t too disappointed, being back in the editor’s office.”

“Not at all. You know, I was starting to regret the decision to move upstairs. Maybe this little time back here will cure me of that.”

“The reason we are calling is that we’re investigating something out here.”

“Oh, what are you working on?”

“It looks like there is someone out here impersonating the EPA. They’re looking for something, but it isn’t pesticides.”

“Okay, what can I do for you?”

“We may need some help. Could you send us a photographer?”

“I’ll send one out right away. He probably won’t get there until tomorrow.”

“That’ll be fine, Perry. We’ll look for him. Here are the directions...” Clark dictated the directions while Perry took them down.

Clark commented, “Looks like we have the day off. The photographer probably won’t be here until tomorrow.”

Hearing that, Martha approached Lois and Clark. She said, “Since you guys have the day off, Clark, your father could use

some help around the farm today. Would you mind if I took Lois with me? I have some things to do in town and I’d like to take her along.”

Lois tried to demur, saying, “But we’re working this investigation. I need to work on some things.”

Clark pulled her into an embrace and whispered in her ear, “You need to go with her. How would it look for you to refuse to go with your future mother-in-law on an outing? Besides, I’m sure she has something special planned or else she wouldn’t ask.” As he was saying this he was stroking her back with his hands. To make it look good, he allowed his hands to drift down and then he patted her derriere.

She gave a surprised squeak, and said, “None of that. We’re not married yet.” Turning to Martha, Lois said, “Just let me change and I’ll be right with you.”

Once Lois had changed into slacks and a top, she and Martha drove off in the truck.

Clark watched them drive off and then joined his dad in the field.

Once they were together, Jonathan asked, “Okay, Clark, what’s the story?”

“What story, Dad?”

“You and Lois. This was rather sudden, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is, Dad. They were threatening to deport her.”

“Why?”

“Because she went out of the country on a story. The story that introduced her to the twins, who told her about my gecko story, which she remembered when she heard Perry read it, and she then showed Perry the rebel stories, which got me the job. So you see, if she hadn’t gone on that story, she wouldn’t have met the twins and heard about the geckos, and I wouldn’t have the job. I owe her.”

Jonathan was convinced that there was more to it, so he asked, “And?”

Clark sighed and then, reluctantly, admitted, “And... I love her. I have from the start.”

Putting an arm across Clark’s shoulders, Jonathan said, “That’s all I needed to hear. Come on, son, let’s go mend some fence.”

The Corn Festival was still going on, but they ignored it as Martha took Lois around to the main shops in Smallville and introduced her to the proprietors, who were all long time friends of Martha’s. Martha’s main objective seemed to be showing off her soon-to-be daughter-in-law. She had Lois help while she made some purchases and arrangements for the wedding. It was unusually hot and Lois found that she was sweating by the time they were finishing up.

They loaded up the bed of the pickup with their bags and headed back to the farm.

When they got there, Lois got out of the truck and was surprised when Martha didn’t. “Aren’t you coming in?”

Shaking her head, Martha said, “No, I have to run over to the Lang place. Some of the things I picked up are for them.”

Lois looked at her sweat-stained shirt and said, “I think I’ll take a shower and change. We may be going out tonight to snoop around.”

“Okay, Lois. I’ll be back in a while.” Throwing the truck in gear, Martha drove off while Lois made her way back inside.

Lois interrupted the story again, “That’s what I always liked about Jonathan and Martha, they are so accepting. If it’s going to make Clark happy, they’re all for it. I’m glad that they accepted me, especially after that trip. I really put Clark through a ringer what with my involvement with Luthor and my infatuation with Superman. It wasn’t until I had Clark’s powers for a while that I

really got to know what it is like to be him.”

“Mom created your costume and supported us both through that time.”

“Is this Lois going to have to go through that? I mean, that happened before we were married. Will it still happen to them once they are married? Are they really going to be married? It is starting to sound like she is having some second thoughts.”

Herb replied, “The timing of events between the universes, with a certain amount of deviation, occurred most of the time in almost the same way. This incident occurred early on in their relationship. As I said, there is another universe where I had to give the Lois of that universe some memories of their future married life.”

“You’ve mentioned that before, Herb. Why did you need to do that?”

“In that particular universe, Sheriff Harris wouldn’t be arriving at the Kent farm in time to rescue Clark from Trask. I gave Lois those memories so that she would be motivated to step in and be his rescuer. In the confrontation with Trask, she – accidentally, mind you — killed Trask. He fell on a pitchfork when she delivered a karate kick defending Clark.”

Shocked, Clark blurted out, “Oh, no. How horrible for her to have that on her conscience.”

Herb smiled and said, “She was able to get over it quickly because she was more worried about Clark. He was wounded and she was relieved that Trask would no longer be bothering them.” (See <http://www.lcfanfic.com/stories/2014/html/ggglowms.html> Green, Green Glow of Home — Matchmaker Style)

Chapter 13

The weather in Kansas at that time of year can be unpredictable, to say the least. The day before had been warm, but comfortable. Today it was hot and dry; unseasonably hot and dry. Clark had never thought much about weather because extremes of hot and cold had never bothered him, but that had changed with the exposure to that rock.

Jonathan and Clark had been replacing fence posts, but under that Kansas sun it had been hot and sweaty work. Clark had been doing all of the digging with a post-hole digger and a shovel.

When they were finished, as he took off his gloves and looked at his hands, he said, “All my life, I just wanted to be normal. Now I’m not so sure. I think I’m going to have a big batch of blisters. I’ve never had a blister before in my life.” Looking at his sweat-stained shirt, he pulled the neck out, and dipping his head into the neckline, sniffed. “Whew, I smell! This never happened to me before. No matter what the temperature, I never sweat. But right now I really **need** a shower.”

Shouldering the post-hole digger and shovel, Jonathan carried them over and dumped them into the trailer on back of the tractor. As he removed his gloves and climbed up into the tractor seat, he said, “You go on ahead, I can finish up here. I just have to put these tools away. You go get cleaned up for your fiancée. I’m gonna ride the fence line and see what other posts need replacing.”

“Thanks, Dad. I appreciate it.” He picked up a Walkman from where it had been in the trailer, and putting the earplugs in his ears, he tuned to the local news station to see what was happening in the world, and if there was any mention of Wayne Irig and what was happening at his farm, as he walked across the field and back to the house.

Lois finished her shower, and as she turned off the water, she rubbed a porthole in the steamed-up glass and looked for the towels. When she didn’t see any, she realized she had neglected to bring in a bath towel with her. She remembered the cabinet that Martha had shown her, but it was in the bedroom.

Clark hadn’t heard anything about Wayne on the news, so he had switched to a country-western station, and was humming along with a familiar tune as he walked by the bathroom, headed for the bedroom.

Lois thought she heard someone passing and called, “Hello, hello! I need some help! I forgot a towel!” Not hearing any reply, she stepped out of the enclosure and looked around as she dripped on the floor. She found a wash cloth and a loofah mitt, neither of which would suffice to dry her off. Standing there wet and naked, she started to feel a chill, so she decided that she’d have to simply leave the bathroom and move to the bedroom where all of the towels were. Since the house was empty there shouldn’t be any problem, other than wet footprints down the hall.

With the earphones in his ears, Clark didn’t hear Lois. He hadn’t seen the pickup truck in the drive so he figured that his mom and Lois were still in town. Thinking he was alone in the house, as soon as he was in the bedroom, he stripped out of his working clothes.

There was a nagging worry in the back of her mind: what if there was someone else in the house? Lois thought she had heard someone walk by, but when she had called out there had been no answer. She decided that she must have just been hearing the old house making noises. That firmed her resolve to get to the bedroom as she thought to herself, <The towels are in the bedroom; therefore, I need to go to the bedroom. I’ll have to just scurry in there. There’s no one else in the house. No problem.>

Clark entered the bedroom, and as he did, he thought, <I didn’t see the truck in the drive, so Mom and Lois must still be in town. Dad’s checking the fence line, so I’m totally alone in the house.> Clark had removed all of his soiled, sweaty clothes and placed them in the hamper, so he was totally naked when he grabbed a towel from the cabinet so that he could go take his shower. Unconcerned about his state of undress because he thought he was the only one in the house, he simply carried the towel in his hand as he turned toward the door.

As he opened the door, he was suddenly knocked off of his feet when Lois barreled into him.

Taken completely by surprise, he shouted, “What the ...”

Reflexively, Clark’s arms went around Lois, clasping her close, and their naked bodies were pressed up against each other as they fell to the floor, with Lois on top.

They looked into each other’s faces and both shouted, “Oh my God!” in unison.

Her voice held surprise, embarrassment, and a little fear as Lois shouted, “Oh God! What are you doing here?” The sensation of naked flesh against equally naked flesh was unmistakable and she shouted, “Why are you naked?”

Her naked body was pressed against him as they fell backward, and the feel of naked flesh against his body was undeniable, but there was also water, and as she was shouting her question, he shouted, “Why are you all wet?” He suddenly realized why he was shouting and pulled the ear plugs out of his ears.

She would have needed her hands and arms to regain her feet as she got off of him, and since she was using them to cover herself, she simply got onto her knees. In her acute embarrassment, she continued to shout, “Don’t look at me. Don’t look at me,” as she tried to cover herself with her hands and arms in an impromptu bikini.

Once she was off of him, he stood, and as he did, he shouted, “I don’t understand,” as he dove for the towel he had been holding.

She walked on her knees, as she made her way behind the bed

to put it between herself and him. Remembering how he had looked at her while she was in her nightie, when he had said he wouldn't peek, she shouted again, "Don't look at me!"

As he leaned over to pick up the towel, he shouted, "Why are you all wet?"

She was looking at him to make sure he wasn't looking at her as he bent over and shouted, "Oh, God, you're showing everything! Cover up! Cover up, for the love of God." Finally she was behind the bed and grabbed a blanket. Pulling it off the bed she wrapped it around herself. In an indignant tone, she challenged, "Explain yourself, please."

Clark was irritated, and as he wrapped the towel around his waist, repeated, "Explain myself?"

"Yes, explain yourself."

"I was going to take a shower."

In an irritated tone she challenged, "You didn't hear me?"

"When?"

"A few minutes ago. I thought I heard you pass the bathroom."

"Oh, yeah, of course I didn't hear you, I was listening to some music! What are you even doing home? I didn't see the truck so I thought that you and Mom were still in town. You just jumped me out of nowhere."

"I didn't mean to jump you. Your mom dropped me off while she went to the Lang's. I went to take a shower, but I forgot to take a towel in with me. I thought you were out in the fields with your father so I was running back here to get a towel. You ... you just ... go! Go! Take your shower! You stink!"

"Right, okay." Clark turned to leave the room and head for the shower, "Nice tattoo by the way. You really need to be careful with what you wear. You wouldn't want that to be seen."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. People might talk."

As he disappeared out the door, Lois, in frustration and mortification, still on her knees, behind the bed, bending at the waist, threw herself face down on the bed, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't purge the feel of their bodies pressed together or the vision of his spectacular naked body and the lustful feelings they engendered in her mind. How was she going to do this? The more time went on and the closer their relationship became, the harder it was to think that what they were doing was going to be temporary.

Herb had to stop the story because both Lois and Clark were laughing so hard that they couldn't pay the slightest bit of attention to him.

When they finally calmed somewhat, Lois asked, "What is her *problem*? They were planning to get married, right? They're going to have to see each other sooner or later. I mean, what's the big deal? I almost show that much when I wear a bikini."

Herb was smiling as he replied, "This Lois didn't grow up where there are long hot summers. Growing up she experienced long cold winters. Swimming was not unknown to her, but growing up she participated more in winter sports. Also, this Lois was a bit more conservative in her dress than most of the Lois Lanes I've come in contact with. Her skirts tended to be a bit on the longer side, usually at least below the knee. Occasionally she would show some cleavage, but rarely. Most of the time she wore blouses with at least short sleeves, never sleeveless."

"Wow, now I'm starting to feel sorry for her. The summers in Metropolis can be brutal."

Herb resumed his narrative.

That night as they were going to bed, Clark was thinking about what had happened in the afternoon, the feel of her body against his, and as he settled on the floor again he muttered, "Oh, so naked."

Lois harrumphed and asked, "Can ... can we not talk about

that, please?" But in the back of her mind she was remembering the look and feel of his body against hers.

With a grin that Lois couldn't see, Clark replied, "I was just sayin'."

They both sighed a few times and then Lois finally decided to change the topic. "About the tattoo, I got it right after he showed up. It was very popular. Everyone was getting them."

"But... on your shoulder? That big red and yellow Superman shield."

"It's not that big and as long as I am careful about what I wear, who's to know?"

"Why did you get it?"

"Well, when he first showed up ... I don't know, it was like hero worship. I really thought I had a special connection to him. After all, I was the one that named him, and he rescued me from the bomb on the shuttle, and then he snatched me out of the air when Trask threw me out of that plane, and he rescued me so many more times, but not so much anymore, I guess. It seems like since I'm not getting into trouble anymore he doesn't bother to visit. I guess it was just a stupid crush."

She paused a few seconds before deciding to relate some more things, "There are some more things that weren't covered in your list. Things you should probably know, like ... I have never been good with pets. That's why I have fish. All I have to do is give them a pinch of food regularly and they are good. I don't like flowers in the house because it reminds me of funerals. I think Mel Gibson is sexy. I've never played a video game." She paused as if deciding whether or not she wanted to voice the next item. Then she continued, "I haven't even been on a date in over three years." She paused again and her tone was different as she went on, "I went into the bathroom and cried after Claude called me that terrible name. I'm sure there are many, many other things, but that's all I can come up with right now."

Clark was silent. The revelation about the Superman tattoo had struck him even more than anything else and it plunged him into deep thought.

She was bothered by his silence and asked, "You there?"

He replied, "Yeah, I'm just processing." After almost a minute, he said, "You had a crush on Superman?"

"Oh my God, that's all you got out of all of that? Sure, I had a crush on Superman. What woman in her right mind wouldn't?"

"But you put it in the *past* tense."

"Yeah, well, I guess I got over it."

After a few seconds, Clark spoke up, "Lois."

"Yes."

"Don't take this the wrong way."

She swallowed hard, not knowing what to expect. "Okay."

After another pause, Clark said, "You are a very... very... beautiful woman."

Lois had had no idea as to what to expect and had been more than a little apprehensive, but hearing this, Lois started to smile. Thinking about dating, she asked, "The twins called you coquinos. I know what that means. You dated them while you were in Brazzaville?"

"Yes, I did. They are very nice girls. I like them a lot."

"Would you like to go back and... and date them again?"

"No, Lois. How would it look if I were married to you and went back to date them?"

"I mean, if we weren't getting married."

"But we are and like I said before, I'm a one-woman man."

Hearing that, and remembering the kisses they had shared, she started to think that the prospect of being married to this man might not be so bad after all. Suddenly, she remembered what had happened earlier in the day and let out an irritated sigh.

Picking up on it, Clark asked, "What's the matter, Lois?"

Embarrassed and afraid to say anything about his family, she said, "Oh, nothing."

“Now, I know that it’s something. What is it? What happened?”

Lois was hesitant, “Well...”

“Come on, Lois. You can tell me.”

Finally deciding that she would need to tell him, she gave in, and in an irritated tone, said, “Your mother...”

Instantly apprehensive, Clark asked, “What about my mother?”

“Do you know why she wanted to take me into town with her?”

“I thought she just wanted to spend some time with you; to get to know you better.”

Clark could hear the frustration and irritation in her tone as she launched into a classic Lois Lane babble, “Oh, she did that too, but the main thing was she wanted make all of the arrangements for the wedding. She has her friend at the cleaners rushing a cleaning of the gown, we sampled cake at the local bakery, and Maisie is going to cater the reception. She ran into some of your friends; if I remember correctly, it was Pete and that other guy — I think his name is Billy – anyhow, they are borrowing chairs from the Grange Hall or somewhere to set up for the ceremony, and to top it all off she wanted to show off her soon-to-be daughter-in-law to all of her friends. I felt like a prize hog in a 4-H contest. I was just waiting for someone to hang a blue ribbon around my neck.”

Clark had started laughing as she babbled. He finally choked out, “You are really starting to identify with us mid-westerners. How did you know about 4-H?”

“I may be a city girl, but everyone has heard of 4-H and what goes on there.”

“I’m sure she meant well.”

“There’s one thing I’ll say for your mother: she’s efficient. I don’t know anyone else that could have accomplished as much in so short a time as she did today.”

Clark mused to himself, “Just wait until there’s a baby on the way.”

He thought that he had spoken too softly for her to hear, but she had heard him and the comment both concerned and thrilled her. She thought, <He’s thinking about children, and that means he might not want a divorce. Could it work?> Before she could worry too much about it, she decided to sleep on it, yawned, and said, “Good night, Clark.”

He smiled and replied, “Good night, Lois.”

They both drifted off to sleep with smiles on their faces.

Lois interrupted Herb and said, “It took me a lot longer to get over Superman, and it wasn’t until then that I saw Clark for who he was, but it was around that same time that I discovered who he really was, and then I was just plain angry. How is he going to tell her?”

“Well, he didn’t exactly tell her.”

Lois gasped and asked, “She discovered it for herself? Was she mad?”

Herb smiled an enigmatic smile and said, “I’ll let you be the judge of that as the story unfolds.”

“All right. What happened next?” Lois asked.

The next morning, after a breakfast prepared by Martha, they headed out.

A short time later, they were on the dirt road, near the Irig farm. Lois pulled the Mustang off the road and parked. Before they exited the car, Clark asked, “What exactly is our plan?”

Lois, knowing that she was flying by the seat of her pants, as usual, challenged, “You sound like you’re one of those people who have to have his whole life worked out ahead of time before he can live it.”

“Yeah, I usually do. So, you have a clear plan?”

“Oh, you like to plan, like you planned to ambush me when I

came out of the shower yesterday.”

Clark reached for her hand and clasped it in his. “You know I didn’t do any such thing. That was a happy accident.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“What I mean is, that wasn’t planned, but I’m happy that it happened. Aren’t you?”

“Yes, no, I don’t know. We are getting married so I guess it would have happened sooner or later. Now, about this, of course, I do have a plan, sort of.”

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

“Oh – harrumph — As soon as I figure it out, I’ll let you know.”

After they exited the vehicle, Clark led the way to a secluded area where they could see the Irig farm.

When they were finally able to see the farm in the distance through the foliage, Lois said, “Okay, here’s the plan. We know that whatever they say they’re doing there is not what they’re actually doing. So, we stay here until we see them doing it.” Thinking of something, Lois frowned, “Maybe we should have brought lunch.”

In a very dry tone, Clark said, “Great plan. Look, as I see it, we need to find out who’s behind this. We need to spy on them until we know who that is.”

Lois turned on him and said, “Yeah, like I said, we spy on them. Now if you have a better plan, speak up.”

Just as Lois finished speaking, an individual in a camouflage uniform, his face painted in a camouflage pattern, and holding a Colt .45 automatic, dropped out of a tree next to them.

Seeing this, Clark rushed the guy, shouting to Lois, “Lois, get out of here!”

A second agent appeared out of the bushes, and this one was holding an M-16. Lois attacked him, getting in a kick that almost dislocated his knee.

One more agent, this one with a Mossberg 12 gauge shotgun with a pistol grip, sprang out of the bushes and shouted, “Freeze!” so Lois and Clark both stopped moving.

The agent that Clark had been struggling with took the opportunity to vent his anger by punching Clark in the stomach.

Clark was bent over gasping for a few seconds as a result of the blow. When he straightened up he said, wryly, “Well, there goes the picnic.”

Under guard by this crew, Lois and Clark were hustled away and into the back of a cargo van. Two of the guards climbed in back with them, while the third drove. A few minutes later they stopped and the back doors were pulled open.

As they were climbing out, Lois said to Clark, “Just in case you were wondering, this wasn’t in the plan.”

The guards started to manhandle them, pushing them in the direction that they wanted them to go.

Clark replied, “I had a hunch.”

Lois started shouting, “Who are you guys? Who do you work for? Do you know who we are?”

As the guards stopped shoving them, Lois stopped shouting. When they stopped, they were facing a tent. Suddenly, Trask stepped from the tent. His men were in a mix of uniforms, which was another indication of the rogue nature of his organization. Some of the men, like the ones that had captured them, wore the camouflage battle dress uniform, while Trask preferred the olive drab jungle fatigue which dated to the Vietnam War era. He said, “So many questions, and from someone in such a precarious position.” He laughed as he spoke.

In startled recognition, and remembering how she had just spoken with Clark about the airplane incident the previous night, Lois blurted out, “Trask! What are you doing in Smallville?”

Putting his hands on his hips he replied, “Now, here I was, wondering the same... thing... about... you.”

In an irritated tone, Clark replied, “We came here because of

the Corn Festival. Then we heard about an EPA cleanup. Our editor thought it could possibly be another Love Canal type story. He thought it could lead to a Pulitzer like the other one did.”

Smugly, Trask replied, “You’re not here for your environmental virtue any more than I am. You know it and I know it.”

The realization of just who they were up against finally hit them, and they exchanged looks.

Clark challenged, “What have you done with Wayne Irig?”

Trask, with that malevolent grin, said, “Why, I... let him go.” He paused to let that sink in before he continued, “Yes, you see, small town ties mean a lot. Any other man would have given up their contact in a minute. But this man: this man took sodium pentothal and a couple of broken fingers and he still wouldn’t talk. Then it came to me. Let him go.”

Just then Ms. Sherman emerged from the tent behind Trask. Spotting her and nodding in her direction, Lois said, “You’re not as clever as you think. I knew she was a fake all along.”

Surprised by this remark, Trask asked, “Really? How?”

Lois spat out, “Too competent to work for the government.” Lois directed her next question to Ms. Sherman, “How’d you get into this, Sherman?”

Trask moved over directly in front of Lois, so close that Lois could smell his bad breath. His exasperation was showing as he said, “You are really starting to get on my nerves.” Then to the guards, “Get her out of my sight, now, please.”

Lois glared daggers at him.

Trask started to raise his hand as if to strike Lois. Clark was almost mad with anxiety about Lois’s safety and he struggled against his captors. Although he struggled with all of his diminished strength he was unable to break away, so he shouted, “Leave her alone, Trask. Don’t you touch her, or...”

Lowering his hand, Trask asked, “Or what, Mr. Kent? Huh? What will you do?”

By this time some of the guards were hustling Lois toward the tent, and Clark continued to struggle against the guards holding him, but he was powerless to break free.

As Lois was being led away, she shouted to Sherman, “Did they recruit you? Did you think you were getting into government work?”

Trask shouted after her, “Shut up!”

Ignoring Trask’s threats, Lois continued to shout at Sherman, “Instead, you’re a thug. Is that what you went to college for? To be a thug?”

Trask, losing his patience completely, gestured at the holding tent and Lois was shoved inside.

As Lois disappeared into the tent, Clark, in anguish, shouted, “Lois!”

Trask stepped closer to Clark and said, “Relax, Mister Kent, my business is with you, not her.”

Clark interrupted this time, “I remember. Trask tried to give me the third degree. At the time, without my powers, there wasn’t much I could do.”

Lois added, “Yeah, they dragged me into that other tent and tied me to a chair. I didn’t know what Trask was after, but I knew it wouldn’t be good. He had proved that in our first encounter.”

In a fatalistic tone, Herb replied, “Trask is the same in almost every universe he appears in. His fear and paranoia overrule his good sense. He was totally fixated on the destruction of Superman. Of course, in hindsight we know that if he had succeeded, most of the human race would have been doomed to destruction when the Nightfall asteroid hit. It was only Superman’s presence that prevented that global disaster.”

Chapter 14

A few minutes later, Clark found himself sitting at a table in

another tent, separated from Lois. Worry about what was happening to her was eating him up, and the fact that without his powers he couldn’t even hear her heartbeat to know her emotional condition had him in a state.

Remembering what Trask had done in their previous encounter put the lie to his assertions that he wouldn’t do anything to harm her. The last time he had caused her to be thrown out of an airplane without a parachute. If Clark hadn’t followed her out, risking exposure when one of the thugs shot at him, she would have died.

Looking around and taking in his surroundings, he saw that there were several of Trask’s agents scattered around, each of them bearing weapons. Once he was seated and the guards had backed away, Trask moved in and leaned over the table at his side. Trask’s face was close enough to Clark’s that when he spoke Clark snorted and almost sneezed to clear his nose of the offensive stench from Trask’s breath. Trask, using what he thought to be an ingratiating tone, said, “I’m going to make you a deal, Mr. Kent, trusting that your stay in Metropolis has put some sense into your head. Give up the alien and I’ll let you live.”

Hearing this promise was not at all comforting. He knew that no matter what he said or did, Trask was planning on killing him. In his current state, powerless — in more ways than one, he realized — he had to play for time, as much time as he could gain. Heaving an exasperated sigh and hoping to deflect Trask from Lois, Clark replied, “What makes you think I would do that even if I could?”

Trask, as if proposing a solution to a puzzle, said, “Kent, I’ve checked on you. You were born in 1966 and Superman came to Smallville around the time you were born. There has to be a connection. Tell me what it is and you live.”

Continuing to play for time by professing ignorance, Clark’s reply was disappointing to Trask, “There’s nothing to tell. I’m learning all this for the first time right now. What makes you so sure that he came to Earth in 1966, if he came to Earth at all? Are you sure he isn’t just an advanced human?”

Determined that he was right and unwilling to accept any other explanation, no matter how reasonable, Trask slammed his hand down on a stack of folders that littered the desk. Startled, Clark jumped and Trask almost shouted in his exasperation, “I’m trying to **save humanity** from an **alien invader**, Kent!”

In the living room at 348 Hyperion, Lois interrupted Herb again, “If Trask had still been around when the New Kryptonians arrived, he would have been convinced that he had been correct all along. Even though he had actually been wrong in his assumptions. Clark wasn’t the advance man, he was another victim. Clark was as much a victim as the rest of the people in Smallville when Nor took over, and if it hadn’t been for Clark, Nor would still be running things now.”

Clark offered, “Yeah, but you never could have convinced him of that. He would have been the one to fire that RPG with the Kryptonite gas and he’d have hoped that I died along with Nor.”

Lois rebutted, “We’re just lucky that Nor and his henchmen were there and that their bodies covered you, protecting you from the gas.”

Lois turned back to Herb and asked, “You told us that the Lois in that other universe killed Trask. Is this one going to have to do the same thing? I’m glad I didn’t have to kill him. I don’t know if I could have lived with that on my conscience. It was bad enough when Luthor jumped to his death and I wasn’t even responsible.”

Herb smiled and replied, “Why don’t I tell some more of the story?”

In a frustrated tone, Lois said, “Okay, but don’t keep stopping this way. I hate it when you stop.”

Realizing that it was Lois who stopped him, but deciding to not point it out, Herb smiled and continued.

In response to Trask's assertion, Clark's reply was succinct, "You have no proof of that, Trask!"

To Clark's relief, Trask moved around so that he was on the opposite side of the table from Clark. At least his bad breath would be diluted by the intervening air. Trask pointed a finger at Clark and said, "There's another possibility. Perhaps this alien has taken over your mind. Perhaps it has infused you with its power."

Clark shook his head in disbelief, "Nobody's infused me with any power. Nobody's taken over my mind, Trask, not even you." The depths of the insanity of this man continued to frighten Clark.

As Clark finished speaking, Sherman entered through the tent flap. Trask noted her arrival and walked over to receive her report.

When he approached, she said, "We got a location on Irig." She looked significantly at Clark before she continued, "He's heading down the access road to the home of a Jonathan **Kent**."

Trask turned and looked again at Clark and when he did he addressed him, "Clark, why didn't you **tell** me this was a family affair? I would have gone easier on you." Trask swung into motion, shouting orders, "Put him in the van with me. Make sure the phone lines are cut at the Kent house. I'll take two men with me. The rest of you break camp. Meet at Delta rendezvous at 1800."

Sherman addressed Trask with a question, "What about me?"

Trask was contemptuous as he replied, "What about you? You'll stay and help move the operation."

Sherman, with a resigned expression, turned and left the tent. She didn't like the situation she had gotten herself into and was trying to think of a way to extricate herself that would preserve her life and freedom, for her daughter's sake. As she left the tent a plan started to form, and this move might give her the opportunity she was seeking. It would all depend on her being accepted as one of the gang. She would have to play along, until she could do what needed to be done. Accordingly she headed for the tent in which Lois was being confined. She needed to pass along the order to start packing up.

After Sherman had departed, Trask, trusting that his orders were going to be followed, turned to his guards. Selecting two of them, he said, "You and you, let's go. Bring him!"

The guards, some of which had been recruited from the dregs of humanity and given a rudimentary military training, were not gentle with Clark as they hustled him to the van. Before even allowing him to stand, they applied shackles to wrists and ankles.

All the time that the guards were applying the shackles Clark had been wishing for his powers and worrying about Lois and her welfare. Trask had said that Clark was the one that he was interested in, but based on what he had seen of Trask, that claim was no guarantee of her safety. However, Clark had no options. Without his powers he was utterly powerless in the hands of his enemy.

As the guards were placing the manacled Clark into the back of the van, Jimmy was in the bushes at the side of the clearing. He had been eating an apple as he was taking pictures using a long telephoto lens. When he saw the guards bring Clark out he shoved the apple in his mouth to hold it while he took pictures. He got snaps of Clark wearing shackles and being hustled into the back of the van. He also got a shot of Trask as he came out of the tent. When Trask appeared, Jimmy recognized him immediately, and his mouth dropped open in shock and the apple he had been eating fell to the ground. He now realized that this situation was worse than it had appeared on the surface and he knew he had to get help.

One of the guards entered the back of the van, rearranged the shackles so that Clark was even more helpless, and then moved to a seat.

After the van pulled away, Jimmy grabbed his equipment and high-tailed it for his rental car. Jumping in the car, he drove with

abandon for town.

A short time later at the Kent farm, Jonathan and Martha were standing in the shed. The old tool box was sitting atop a bale of hay, open, and the green crystals were visible. Even with sunshine streaming in through the windows the sickly evil green glow of the crystals was still evident.

Jonathan was staring at the offending rock as he addressed Martha, "I don't know what to do with it. I can't give it to anybody, but I sure as heck don't want to keep this anywhere near Clark."

Martha expressed her confusion, "Sometimes I don't understand why things happen. How all his life he's always talked about being 'normal.' Now he is. It's what he says he wants, but..."

"Martha, it doesn't feel right, because Clark's not normal. Normal for him is being super. Until I opened that box... just yesterday, while we were working, he was saying how he had never gotten a blister before or sweated from working in the sun."

Martha picked up on what her husband was feeling and moved over to comfort him, "Don't blame yourself, Jonathan. You didn't do this to him."

In a gesture of disgust, Jonathan flipped the top of the tool box closed.

The echoes bouncing off the walls of the shed from the sound of the box closing had barely died down when suddenly they were interrupted by a banging on the window and a shout, "Jonathan! It's Wayne Irig!"

Surprised at suddenly seeing his friend, and feeling some relief at actually seeing him after hearing Lois and Clark's suspicions that he was in trouble, Jonathan shouted, "Wayne! Where have you been?"

Wayne entered the shed and only then did Jonathan get a good look at him. He looked battered and beaten. There was a bandana wrapped around one of his hands, and he cradled the injury in his other hand. He was obviously in a lot of pain. Jonathan blurted out, "Wayne! My God, look at you. What did they **do** to you?"

Typical of Wayne Irig, a man of few words, he cut right to the chase, "We've got a problem, Jonathan, a bad one."

Jonathan was very solicitous of Wayne's condition and tried to assist him to sit on a bale of hay.

Instead of sitting, Wayne started to pace with nervous energy. Jonathan was sure that if one of his hands hadn't somehow been injured, Wayne would have been flinging his arms around.

Trying to calm his friend down, Jonathan said, "Okay. All right. I'm with you. Calm down, Wayne." Then aside, he said to Martha, "Martha, get a doctor."

Before Martha had a chance to move toward the door, Wayne, in an agitated tone said, "No, I'm all right. But, there's *men* up at my place. *Men* with **guns**. They're looking for that blasted **rock** I gave you." Looking around in something as close to panic as Jonathan had ever seen in Wayne Irig, he continued, "We've got to get to the police, **now**."

Jonathan didn't like this turn. He had just been talking about disposing of the rock in order to protect Clark and keep it a secret, and now Wayne wanted to bring in the police. He had to use what influence he had with Wayne to control the situation. "Wayne, we've been friends for years. You trust me, don't you?"

Wayne looked at Jonathan with a question in his eyes. He couldn't figure out why Jonathan would ask a question like that. There was actually only one answer he could give, "Sure."

Nodding at Wayne's answer, Jonathan pressed ahead, "Then believe me. That green rock is **dangerous**. But we **can't** call the police and we **can't** let those men have it either."

Wayne was confused. Jonathan was saying something, but it didn't match up with what he had seen. "What do you mean, 'dangerous'? What does it do?"

“Wayne, you’re gonna have to trust me when I say it makes some people sick, that’s all I know. So no more red tape, you and me, we’re going to go destroy it right now. Somehow . . .”

They had been so centered on the conversation they were having that they hadn’t heard the van drive up. The first indication that they were not alone was when Trask kicked in the door of the shed. He was followed by the two agents as he stepped in.

He took in the tableau and then, obviously having overheard, said in response to Jonathan’s statement, “I don’t think so.”

Trask spotted the oversized tool box where it was sitting atop a hay bale. He stepped over to it and opened it. The sickly green glow permeated the entire shed once again.

Jonathan and Martha shared a worried look.

After Jimmy left to get help the camp became a flurry of activity. Sherman started going from group to group, relaying Trask’s order to pack up and move out. The workers immediately started packing up equipment. Calls were made on walkie-talkies and flat beds for the bulldozers and other heavy equipment to be loaded on started arriving. Other agents started removing tables, chairs, file cabinets and other office paraphernalia from the tents and loading them onto trucks.

Ms. Sherman entered the tent where Lois was being held and addressed the guard, “You need to help pack up. We’re leaving.”

The guard glanced at Lois and saw that she was still bound, but he hesitated. When the guard glanced in her direction, Lois stopped moving, but as soon as he turned away she resumed her attempts to get free of her bonds.

Sherman said, “Trask said that everyone needs to help. We have to load all of the heavy equipment. You can go. I’ll watch her.”

The guard, believing that the order was from Trask and simply being relayed by Sherman, nodded and left.

Lois addressed Sherman, in a sarcastic tone, “Social call or business?”

Sherman decided that she needed to give the guard sufficient time to be out of earshot so she played her part. She had seen that Lois was trying to escape her bonds, but didn’t move to assist and at least didn’t try to prevent her as she replied, although reluctantly, “You talk like someone who doesn’t understand the trouble she’s in,” just in case the guard was listening.

Lois replied, sarcastically, “I know exactly what’s going on. I know that if Trask hasn’t killed somebody yet, he’s about to. And that’ll make you an accessory to murder.”

Sherman, who had been in the process of arranging the files that were scattered over a table prior to putting them in a box for transport, stopped, walked quietly to the tent flap, and checked for observers. When she saw the guard’s retreating back, she heaved a silent sigh of relief. She then turned to Lois and said in a defeated tone, “You’re right. Trask is a madman,” as she walked over to her.

Lois challenged, “You just now figured this out?”

“No, but I have a daughter to worry about.” As she was saying this, now being assured that the guard had left, Sherman started to remove Lois’s bonds.

Lois betrayed her surprise when Sherman started to release her.

Sherman noticed this and said, “Trask is a madman. Look, I’ve got a little girl depending on me. If he kills me or if I go to jail as an accessory, it’s all the same. You want to know just how mad he is? He has your friend’s parents. He’s going to make it look like a fire burned the place down with them in it.”

Lois was horrified at this prospect, and her thoughts went to the older couple and the man that she had so recently, she had to admit to herself, come to love so deeply. In an anguished tone, Lois almost shouted, “Martha and Jonathan! And Clark?”

Nodding her head, Sherman said, “Yes, but Trask has other

plans for him.”

As Sherman parted the last of the ropes, Lois asked, “Like what?” Lois started rubbing her wrists where the ropes had chafed.

“Trask thinks Clark knows how to find Superman and he thinks some rock they found here can kill Superman.”

Hearing this, Lois became worried: worried for Clark, and worried for Superman. Spotting the field telephone, she asked, “Does that thing work?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Sherman replied, “I guess. I saw them using it.”

Picking up the handset, Lois heard a dial tone. She looked for a rotary dial and didn’t find any. She saw a crank on the side, and remembering some old movies, decided to try it. She gave the crank a twirl and listened. Finally an operator came on the line, “Number please.”

Speaking into the handset, Lois said, “Operator, I don’t know the number. I need to talk to Sheriff Harris.”

“I’ll connect you.” There was a pause and then Lois heard, “Smallville Sheriff’s Office.”

Unbeknownst to Lois or Clark, Jimmy Olsen had been sent to get pictures, had seen a manacled Clark being manhandled into the back of a van, and had recognized Trask. He had high-tailed it into town to alert the Sheriff.

Jimmy ignored a dozen traffic regulations on his way into town, and once in town he spotted a police patrol car parked at the town square. He skidded to a stop and jumped out of the car. As he did, he realized that in his haste he had neglected to remove the camera bag, the strap of which was still over his shoulder. The thing that reminded him of it was the fact that it caught on the steering wheel and almost caused him to fall flat on his face as he exited the car. He had barely remembered to shut the engine off, but once out of the car and on his feet, he sprinted to a man in uniform and addressed him, “Sheriff, we’ve got an emergency!”

Rachel had watched with concern as this madman drove into the center of town and then with amusement as he extricated himself from his vehicle. Then, overhearing this statement and somewhat protective of her position, she said, “Over here.”

Jimmy did a double-take as the deputy smiled and pointed at Rachel.

Rachel stepped over, took the keys from Jimmy’s hand, and flipping them to Deputy Cooper said, “Coop, would you put this car somewhere legal, please?”

Snagging the keys from mid-air, Coop nodded and headed for the car to move it.

Turning back to Jimmy, Rachel said, “If this is some kind of emergency, you’d better start talking. . . fast.”

Jimmy was so excited he was almost totally incoherent as he launched into a Lois-like babble, “Okay, right. There’s a guy, his name’s Trask, he thinks there are UFO’s, I mean, there **are** UFO’S, but this guy collects them. Anyway he’s here in Smallville and he’s got my friends and we gotta go save them now or they’re gonna be toast. Do you know how to call the Army? The National Guard? We’re gonna need some kind of helicopter. . .”

Rachel gave this very excitable and excited young man a close appraisal, trying to decide whether to believe him or arrest him. She was torn. Finally she decided to get more information. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

Jimmy, calming down somewhat replied, “My name is Jimmy Olsen. I’m from Metropolis. I’m with the Daily Planet and my friends -”

Rachel interrupted him at this point and her face brightened up as she said, “Clark Kent.”

Jimmy brightened up at this sign of recognition from Rachel, and he added, “and Lois Lane.”

Rachel’s face fell as she said, “Oh, her.” Her face looked like she had just bitten into a particularly sour lemon as she did.

Not picking up on Rachel's attitude, Jimmy continued, "The guy who's got them, Trask, he could do anything, including murder them."

Rachel, seeing how agitated and yet sincere he was, decided that immediate action would be needed. She turned toward the patrol car and said, "Get in."

There was some confusion as they tried to move past one another with Rachel heading for the driver's seat. All she could do was shake her head at this very excited city boy.

As soon as Jimmy was in and the door closed, Rachel pushed down on the gas pedal and peeled away. As they started to head out of town, Rachel asked, "Where are they?"

"They were at a farm. I think the name started with an 'I'."

"Would it be the Irig farm?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

Rachel picked up the microphone of her two-way radio, and keying the microphone, said, "Unit one to Base. This is the sheriff. I need back-up. Have all cars report to the Irig farm, ASAP."

After receiving acknowledgements from her deputies, Rachel put the microphone in its clip and then said to Jimmy, "By the way, my name is Rachel Harris."

"Pleased to meet you, Sheriff."

She paused for a few seconds before she asked, "How well do you know Clark Kent?"

Jimmy smiled and said, "Me and CK? We're best buds."

"Has he ever mentioned me?"

If Jimmy answered it was drowned out by the roar of the engine. Seconds later, before she could ask him to repeat his answer, a call came in on the police radio for the sheriff. The dispatcher said, "Sheriff, I've got some woman talking about UFOs and the government and Superman. It's probably a crank. Should I blow her off?"

Rachel realized from the description just who it was and said, "No, it's okay, patch her through." Then keying her microphone again she said, "Go ahead Lois."

Lois was frantic as she said, "Sheriff, you have to get to the Kent farm, immediately."

Rachel replied, "Copy that. I'm on my way to the Irig farm to check out the disturbance there."

Lois said, "Forget that! That's where I am. They're packing up to leave. You need to get to the Kent farm... **now**. The Kents are in danger."

"I'm on my way!" Rachel put on her lights and siren because to this point she had been code 1, no lights, no siren. A short time later she was halted at the railroad crossing by a freight train.

She picked up her microphone and keying it sent, "All units, I need units 3 and 4 to report to the Irig place, all others respond directly to the Kent farm. The freight has me blocked. I'll get there as quick as I can."

Jimmy, seeing that they weren't moving and probably wouldn't be for some time, thought that now would be an appropriate time to try the signal watch and try to get Superman's help. He leaned out of the car window, and holding his wrist up, triggered the signal. Muttering to himself as if speaking to the superhero, he said, "I'll apologize later, big guy."

While they were waiting, Rachel removed her revolver, a chrome-plated western style six-shooter, from its holster and spun the cylinder checking to make sure it was loaded.

Jimmy could see that her hands were shaking somewhat, so he asked, "You ever fire that before?"

Rachel had a nervous smile to go along with her shaking hands as she replied, "Of course I've fired it, but only on the range. Smallville's not exactly what you would call the crime capital of the world."

Jimmy quipped, "Not exactly a confidence builder."

When she finished checking the revolver, she replaced it in its holster and returned to the other topic, "This Lois. Does she love

Clark and does he love her?"

"Gee, Sheriff, I don't know. It was only a couple of days ago that we all heard that they were getting married. Nobody knew anything about it before then. I kinda thought that they were getting very friendly before they were promoted to the editor's office, but then she sort of took the office over and things weren't the same. It came as a surprise, I tell you. He might have some feelings for her, but who can tell?"

Rachel smiled and nodded her head. The caboose came into sight and Rachel shifted back into drive. As soon as the intersection was clear they were moving.

"This is getting exciting. Did Rachel get there in time?"

Herb's answer wasn't comforting, "Sort of."

Clark let out a groan, "Oh, no."

Chapter 15

Once she had placed the call to the sheriff, Lois looked around, trying to determine her best course of action. While Lois was making the call, Sherman had gone to the front of the tent and acted as a lookout. When she rejoined Lois, she led her to the side and lifted the canvas. "Stay low and near the bushes. Most of them are busy loading the heavy equipment. Good luck."

Lois asked, "What'll they do to you when they see I'm gone?"

Sherman thought for a second before she answered, "I'll tell them I was knocked out. I'll just lie down on the ground until I hear someone coming and make it look like I'm just coming to."

Lois said, "Thanks," ducked under the side of the tent where she wouldn't be seen, and headed back to where she had parked the car. Crouching low and dashing from bush to bush, being careful to move only when no one was looking in her direction, she made it away from the work area. All of the guards had been pulled in to help with the move so she made it all the way to the car without incident. Fortunately they hadn't taken her keys which meant that she wouldn't have to boost the car. Reaching the car, she started it, and with tires throwing gravel she headed back to the Kent farm.

She didn't drive onto the property, but instead parked out of sight. Exiting the car, she stealthily approached the farm. When she got close enough, she saw the van that they had been in parked near some buildings. She only saw a couple of men, and they were busy in what appeared to be a small shed standing apart from the barn, so she snuck over to the van and climbed in through the side door, closing it silently after herself. As soon as her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she saw Clark. He was staring at her in disbelief and slumped against the side of the van. His hands were shackled and suspended in the air. His ankles were also shackled.

Taking in the situation immediately, she looked around for anything she could use to pick the locks.

Clark said in a harsh whisper, "Lois, what are you doing here? It's too dangerous."

"I need to get you out of those cuffs."

"What if Trask catches you?" He could hear the thud of combat boots approaching and said, "Someone's coming. Quick, hide behind those boxes."

Lois was quick to comply, and it was a good thing because she was no sooner hidden than the rear doors were pulled open.

When the back doors of the van opened, Clark blinked in the sudden glare of the sunlight. His movements were very restricted because of the shackles on his wrists and ankles. To top it off, the wrist shackles had been thrown over a brace in the ceiling of the van before being closed about his wrists, so that he was literally hanging by his wrists. It was fortunate that the low overhead of the van allowed him to sit on the floor. Trask confronted Clark and said, "Your situation grows desperate, Mr. Kent. I now have your parents." He was emphatic, but as he continued he became frantic, "What I **want** is Superman. If you want to save your parents,

you'll tell me what I want to know." He paused for a few seconds as if deciding on a course of action and then, making his decision, he spoke again, "I'll make a deal with you, a trade. You give me Superman and I'll let them live."

Emotions flitted across Clark's features, fear predominating. Fear for his parents' welfare and fear for Lois's life. His personal danger never entered his mind. His only concern was for those he loved. In a flash he weighed his options and knew there was only one answer. He stated, "You have to promise that you'll let them go. Do I have your word on that?" He had decided on a desperate ploy. He just hoped it would work. The fact that right now he was powerless and vulnerable could make or break the situation, but he had to try.

Eagerly, almost like a child with a toy being dangled in front of him, Trask said, "Oh, I do. I do. I absolutely do. Of course... you have my word."

Clark said, "Okay then, he's right here. I'm Superman."

Hearing this, Lois stifled a gasp that fortunately Trask didn't hear.

Trask just stared at him. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. What Trask was seeing put the lie to Kent's words. Clark Kent was shackled and helpless, unable to free himself, and he was claiming to be Superman. What if he was only acting weak?

When Trask didn't answer or even move, Clark tried again, "Really, Trask, I'm Superman."

Trask finally responded by asking in a skeptical tone, "Are you now?" His face didn't change from one of disbelief as he pulled his sidearm. He preferred a cross-draw holster so his weapon was on the left side of his belt. In this case he used his left hand to pull the weapon out. It was more awkward, but he wanted to emphasize what he was doing for Kent's benefit. Once he had drawn the weapon and shifted it to his right hand, Trask pulled the hammer back so that he could fire single-action and then he quickly brought the weapon to bear, pointing it at Clark.

It all was happening so fast that Lois didn't have time to react, and it was a good thing that she didn't because that would have only put her into greater danger.

Seeing this action Clark was afraid that he had overplayed his hand. Being vulnerable, if Trask shot him he could actually be seriously injured or even die. Fear took over and Clark cringed back and shouted, "Wait! No, Trask, no!"

With that malevolent grin on his face at Kent's response to his threat, Trask pulled the trigger, but all that was heard was the metallic click of the hammer falling on the firing pin. There was no explosion because Trask hadn't loaded a round into the breech. Clark slumped back as far as the chains would allow, gasping for breath, the fear having rendered regular breathing problematical. Trask laughed as he said, "That was **fear**, Mr. Kent, stark terror. This gun wouldn't harm Superman so **he** wouldn't **be** afraid. So much for you being noble and trying to shield Superman. It was a nice try, but I want the real thing. Now, where is he?"

Clark needed to buy some time so that Lois could escape, so he kept his mouth shut even in the face of Trask's raging menace.

Trask, seeing that Clark was being less than cooperative, decided that additional motivation was needed. He decided to give him some time to think about the situation and slammed the doors of the van closed while he worked on that motivation.

As soon as the doors were closed again, Lois came out from hiding and hissed, "What did you think you were doing? He could have **shot** you."

"Were you worried about me?"

"Of course I was worried about you. We still need to get married."

"Oh, just so you won't be deported."

"Yeah, there is that, but I don't want to see you get hurt. I've sorta, kinda become attached to you. I need to find something I can pick those locks with and we can get out of here."

"That won't do any good. He has my parents."

With confidence, or false bravado, Lois affirmed, "We'll get them out too."

After he closed the doors of the van, Trask went to the shed to check on the job his underlings had done in tying up the prisoners. He noticed that Wayne Irig appeared to be unconscious, probably a result of all that he had been through and the pain of his broken fingers. Satisfied that the prisoners were secure, Trask moved over to the van, and opening the doors again, said, "Maybe you won't talk on your own account, but what about your family?"

When Clark had heard Trask approach, he had told Lois to hide again, so she was again crouching behind the boxes, listening to everything.

Seeing that Clark remained uncooperative, Trask jacked the slide on his automatic after seating the magazine. "This time I'm not kidding. Now, you tell me just where Superman is or I start on you. First the knees, then the elbows. Do I need to draw you a diagram? If that doesn't work..." He pulled out a matchbook and held it up for Clark to see.

Lois was tempted to topple the boxes over on Trask, but realized that they were too far inside of the van to do any good, so she kept quiet and still.

Counting on the fact that even Trask wouldn't commit the cold-blooded murder of innocents in this way, Clark maintained his silence.

Seeing that his threats were not working, in frustration, Trask slammed the doors shut again. Moving away from the van he started scanning the sky, looking for a blue- and red-clad form.

After several minutes of this Trask was becoming impatient. He had been baulked at every turn. He had Lane and Kent, and the superhero hadn't come to their aid, unlike the last time. Maybe he was at the Irig farm rescuing Lane, or maybe he needed her here to get Kent to speak. He grabbed a walkie-talkie and called one of his agents at that farm, "I want you to check on Lane. Make sure she is still there. Over."

"Roger, Colonel. I'll check and call you back. Out."

While he waited for the callback, Trask walked over to the door of the shed and checked on the unwilling occupants. He signaled to one of his agents. He indicated the gasoline can. The agent picked it up, and starting inside the shed, poured gasoline first on the hay and then laid a trail out the door and twenty feet across the yard.

Once the agent dropped the can he headed for the van to join his companion who was now standing near it. Trask addressed the Kents, "Remember, you give your lives in the cause of humanity."

For some time, he stood there looking into the sky, waiting for the superhero to appear.

Before his underlings had a chance to enter the van, he gestured to them as he said, "Scout the perimeter." Obediently the guards headed for the road leaving Trask there by himself again.

His walkie-talkie came to life and he heard, "Colonel?"

"Trask, here. Over."

"Colonel, the Lane woman is gone. We found Sherman, apparently knocked out. Over."

"You're sure about that? Ask her how she was knocked out. Over."

"She's not sure. She says she was packing for the move and suddenly she was knocked out. Over."

"Hurry the move. Out."

Trask was thinking, <There are two possibilities, Lane got loose or Superman freed her. If that's the case he could come here next.> He started staring into the sky looking for the primary color wearing superhero.

In the back of the van, Clark struggled against his bonds, to no avail. Lois had not found anything with which to pick the locks and his powers had not returned and he had no idea as to just when or if that would happen. At the end of his strength and almost at

the end of his rope, he slumped in despair, exhausted from his struggles. Lois tried to comfort him by carrying on a whispered conversation. Clark filled her in on what he had surmised from what Trask had told him. He told her about the rock and how Trask planned to use it against Superman.

Almost despairing of getting out of this situation, Lois finally admitted to herself that Clark really mattered to her. She finally put her arms around his neck and hugged him. She said, “Clark, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? Sorry for what?”

Her eyes bright with unshed tears, she pulled back and said, “Sorry for putting you in this position.”

“Lois, Trask is the one that put me in this position, not you.”

As she laid her cheek on his chest, she said, “No, I mean, making you marry me.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m not,” he replied in the breath of a whisper.

She put her arms back around his neck and started to quietly sob. As she did, she whispered, “I think...” “I think...” “I think...” Each time she would start her sentence, a wracking sob would interrupt it.

Lois had fallen silent, simply hanging onto him and sobbing, when after a short time Clark suddenly heard an **ear-splitting** beeping noise. His head snapped up, remembering that sound from the other day at the Planet, and he knew two things: first and most importantly, his powers were back, and two, Jimmy Olsen was nearby. Smiling, he thought, <I’m back!> Clark grasped the chain linking the manacles and pulled. The links broke! He smiled at this success, brought his now free hands down, placed a palm on each side of Lois’s face, and pulled her into a tender kiss.

Lois eagerly participated in the kiss and it took a few seconds for what was happening to register. When it did she looked at him in shock and asked, “How’d you do that?”

Without saying anything, he reached down, and with his fingers, he broke the shackles off of his wrists and ankles while Lois looked on aghast.

Suddenly Clark heard the rasp of a match being struck. He knew there could be only one reason for that sound. He had never seen Trask smoke so it had to have something to do with his parents. In Superman’s voice he said, “Stay here.”

As she watched in awe, he quickly moved to the back of the van where he placed his hands on the doors and shoved. The doors almost exploded outward, completely leaving their hinges and falling to the ground.

As Trask was dropping the match on the gasoline trail, he looked up in surprise.

When Trask dropped the match on the trail of gasoline, it ignited and formed a trail of flames which raced toward the shed. That was when the doors flew off of the van and Clark jumped out. Instantly taking stock of the situation, he super-spined over, and using his super lungs inhaled, sucking the air and the flames from the gasoline, snuffing the fire. Then, looking up, he exhaled, blowing the superheated air up and away from the gasoline.

Trask was staring at him in amazement, stunned at seeing this. It suddenly dawned on Trask that if he had actually shot Clark, unless Clark had been ‘playing ‘possum’, he could have done away with this menace to society. As he watched, Clark disappeared into the shed and remained there. Trask had only one thought now: the rock. He needed to get it and see just how it affected Clark. He hastened to where he had placed it, and opening the lid, lifted the rock out of the container.

Lois was watching everything from her hiding place in the back of the van. It amazed her to see Clark perform feats that she had believed only Superman could perform. Thoughts were swirling around in her head as she watched. Lois also saw Clark disappear into the shed. She saw Trask as he approached the shed and then heard Martha’s voice as she shouted, “Clark, behind

you!”

At her shout, Clark stood and spun around. When he did, he saw Trask approaching, but still at a distance. He hadn’t finished releasing his parents from the ropes which bound them, but he stopped and turning back to them, he said, “Just a minute.” He moved to the doorway, exited the shed and moved to confront Trask.

He watched Trask. Trask was twenty-five feet away, simply standing there with his hands behind his back, looking like a soldier in the parade rest posture.

In a threatening tone, Clark said, “Don’t take another step, Trask.”

With a smirk, Trask said, “Fighting words, Mister Kent. Or should I call you, ‘Superman’?” He considered the implications for a second before continuing, “A secret identity. Very clever.”

Slowly, a step at a time, Clark started moving toward Trask. As he closed the distance, he was speaking. “You’re going to prison, Trask. For attempted murder, for kidnapping, for arson, and for official misconduct.”

Confidently, Trask tried one final threat, “Oh, but I’ll tell everyone your secret.”

Clark was fed up with Trask. In a determined tone he said, “I... don’t... care. This ends... **now**, Trask!”

Trask smirked and said, “I agree, but the question is... for whom?”

At super-speed Clark closed the distance, intent upon securing Trask for the police. When he was within ten feet of Trask he started to feel the same pain he had experienced the other night when his father had accidentally exposed him to the rock. The closer he moved the more intense the pain was. His speed faltered and when he was almost within arm’s length the pain was contorting his features. He tried to backpedal, to get more distance, but his strength and speed failed him. Trask followed Clark as he backed away, maintaining the distance. Suddenly, Clark’s knees went weak and he collapsed to the dirt.

Watching this, Lois gasped in dismay. Because of her position, in the van, she was behind Trask and had seen the glowing green rock that he held behind his back. She knew that this had to be the rock that Clark had told her about: the rock that could kill him.

Seeing Clark collapse, Trask began to smile. Trask was pleased to see that Clark had to fight to even breathe.

Standing over Clark, Trask smiled that malevolent smile and said, “You think you’re **better** than humans, **don’t** you? Flying around, oh so **perfect** and **superior**. Well, those days are **over** now, **aren’t** they?”

From between gritted teeth, Clark said, “You’re wrong!”

There was a gloating tone to his voice as Trask said, “No, as it happens, **you** are wrong. It’s over now. **I** have **won** and this little piece of **home** is going to be the death of you, Superman.”

Clark was holding his stomach, and feeling like he was going to vomit. He was on his knees and bent over. He craned his head around and looked up at Trask. It took all of his effort to even breathe, let alone talk.

Suddenly, Trask dropped the rock next to Clark and spun, delivering a spinning wheel kick which sent Clark sprawling in the dirt.

Trask didn’t see Lois peeking out from the back of the van. Lois had a worried expression on her face, but she knew there was nothing she could do just then. She had to watch and wait for her opportunity. If she were to reveal her presence there was nothing stopping Trask from killing her on the spot as an accessory or using her against Clark. She just hoped Trask didn’t pull his gun and shoot Clark. Remembering the paper cut, she knew that because of that rock Clark had to be vulnerable again, but she thought it was possible Trask didn’t know that Clark would be vulnerable to ordinary weapons and was depending on the rock to do the dirty work.

Clark had rolled away from the green rock when Trask kicked him, so Trask picked it up and moved it closer to Clark. As the distance decreased Clark's pain increased exponentially. When Trask had it close, Clark was writhing on the ground in pain. Trask said, with the air of one who has won a major conflict, "I've won."

Trask could faintly hear sirens in the distance. Coming to a decision, he pushed the rock on the ground even closer to Clark and said, "Unfortunately, I won't be able to stay for the services." Knowing that his operations were outside the law, he knew he had to leave. He only hoped that his adversary would be dead before help arrived. Trask turned his back and headed for the van and escape.

Clark interrupted, "I was able to throw that rock away. I made a mistake by throwing it into the pond. When we were fighting I was being exposed again. Did he do that too?"

"Ah, my boy. This Clark had an ace in the hole, so to speak, uh, though in actuality it was a queen. His Lois was there, watching all of this unfold."

"But did she know what to do?"

"He had told her of some of the effects of that rock and she had been watching."

Lois spoke up, "Yeah, Clark. It wasn't me, but actually it was. Give me a little credit. If I had been there I would have figured it out. She helped, didn't she, Herb?"

"Why don't I continue the story?"

Chapter 16

Clark was in so much pain that he could only writhe on the ground. He was totally helpless and close to losing consciousness.

Trask was still unaware of Lois's presence and as he passed the van, Lois saw her chance. She thought to herself, <I have to get that rock away from Clark!> Jumping down from the back of the van, she scurried out from her concealment and stooped to pick up the rock. As quickly as she could, she ran away bearing the dangerous mineral. She didn't stop until she was on the other side of the shed and at least fifty feet from Clark. Using her hands, heedless of what it was doing to her fingernails, she quickly scooped out a hollow in the dirt, dropped the rock in it, and then pushed the dirt over it with her hands to cover it up.

As soon as Lois took the rock away, Clark started to recover. No longer was he in the extreme pain that he had been and consciousness returned in a flash. He didn't know what had caused the change because his eyes had been closed at the time. He had heard running footsteps. They had been light so he knew it hadn't been Trask. He could only surmise that it had been Lois and that somehow she had correctly guessed that she needed to remove that poisonous rock. He knew that he was without his powers and was vulnerable again, but at least the pain was gone. With the pain lifted he was able to stir and again open his eyes. The sight that greeted him was that of Trask's retreating back as Trask entered the van. Knowing that there was only one way to prevent Trask from escaping, he started pushing himself upright and shouted, as strongly as he could, "Trask!" He had to use himself as bait to keep Trask from getting away.

Surprised at hearing his name, Trask turned, expecting to see Clark still groveling on the ground, but instead saw him rising to his feet and said, "Oh, very brave, and very foolish." He unholstered his weapon, but seeing Clark apparently unsteady on his feet, decided to torture him somewhat before killing him. Waving the gun negligently around he said, "Now, let's see. Who should go first? You... or the human traitors who have sheltered you all these years?" Seeing the look of fear on Clark's face was everything he had hoped for, so Trask decided to save the best for last and headed for the shed.

Perceiving the threat to his family, desperation seized Clark and infused him with strength he didn't know he possessed. As

Trask passed close to him, Clark charged Trask, hitting him like a linebacker tackling the quarterback, knocking him off of his feet. Trask had been showboating, and as a result, with the collision Trask lost his grip on his automatic and it went flying.

After the collision, as they were picking themselves up, Clark appeared to be played out from that effort. He was bent over at the waist trying to catch his breath as if he had run a race.

Trask, seeing this, sneered and said, "That's okay, Superman, I don't need a gun." Trask approached and launched an unarmed attack. He had been given the fundamentals of the martial arts in basic training, but apparently the years of command had diminished his need of practice. His sloppiness was apparent as he launched a kick which lacked the power and thrust of a practitioner, but it was still strong enough to bowl Clark over because of his weakened condition, and it sent him sprawling on the ground.

Disdaining Clark's pitiful efforts to prevent him from harming his parents, Trask started to walk right past him toward the shed.

Without climbing to his feet and with a supreme effort of will, Clark launched himself at Trask's legs and grabbed them, pulling Trask to the ground.

As Clark was pulling Trask to the ground, Lois returned from burying the rock and stood, partially concealed behind the corner of the shed and watched. She knew that she dared not interfere because Trask was not above using her against Clark.

Even in this weakened state, Clark displayed a superhero's courage, and proved it wasn't just super-powers that made Clark Kent a superman, but a super-heart. Clark and Trask battled man-to-man. It quickly became obvious that Trask was the superior street fighter, but Clark battled with the strength of desperation because he had the most to lose.

While they were on the ground they grappled. Trask was finally able to get in a solid punch and Clark released Trask. Clark stumbled back against the side of the shed near where Lois was hiding. Trask moved in and launched a side-kick which Clark avoided, but which made a hole in the wall of the shed. While Trask's leg was caught in the hole he had created, Clark again tackled him, spinning him around and throwing him into the side of the shed, shattering the window. Trask threw him off and Clark fell backward over a bale of hay. Trask pursued him, rolling over the hay bale before coming up on his feet in a fighting stance and looming over Clark who was still on his back on the ground. Trask landed on his feet, but when he did he was too close to Clark, and Clark managed to sweep his feet out from under him, causing him to fall heavily.

Fortunately, thanks to Lois's intervention, Clark's exposure to the rock had been of much shorter duration than the earlier exposure. Clark could feel himself recovering some of the strength which he had lost from the exposure and he was very thankful that it was a bright sunny day. The problem was that he had no way of knowing when his powers would return. This exposure had come so soon after he had finally recovered his powers from the earlier exposure that there was no way to tell what the effect was going to be.

Thinking that her martial arts skills might prove useful, Lois watched the fight, waiting for her chance to enter the fray.

She saw Clark sweep Trask's feet causing him to fall. Seeing Clark gain his feet before Trask, she thought he was finally going to have the upper hand in the conflict. She gasped when she saw that when Trask got up he had a long-handled spade in his hands. Apparently it had been on the ground next to him when he fell. Using it like a baseball bat, and trying to cut Clark with the shovel blade, he took a swing at Clark.

She felt relieved when Clark was able to duck under the spade. The swing took the shovel to Trask's left side, and rather than trying to swing south-paw, Trask used the handle to try to jab Clark in the stomach.

Being vulnerable, when Clark was jabbed with the handle it took the wind out of him and he bent over, but as Clark bent over he grabbed the handle in reflex with both hands as he did.

Trask tried to wrench the spade free and failed. Thanks to the sunlight Clark's strength was returning and even though he was still weaker than usual he was able to wrest the shovel from Trask.

When the shovel was wrested from his grip, Trask backpedaled to get some distance in case Clark tried the same tactic on him.

Seeing this Lois did a silent cheer. She couldn't be out there, but she could cheer Clark on.

Clark, realizing that what he was holding could possibly be a deadly weapon, was appalled at the idea and tossed the shovel aside. Seeing a hay fork lying nearby, Clark decided to act preemptively. Picking it up, he snapped the handle over his knee near the tines so that Trask couldn't use it as a weapon then threw the two halves away.

With a roar of frustration, Trask tackled Clark and as they tussled they spun first to the left and then the right. Because of the sunlight, minute by minute, Clark could feel his strength returning, but very slowly. As a result, he managed to stay on his feet, but he gave ground. Their momentum carried them out onto a short dock in the pond and then the two of them tumbled off the dock and into the water, where they started trading blows.

Trask was able to get the upper hand briefly and forced Clark's head below the surface of the water, intent on drowning him. Clark's strength prevailed, however, and he was able to break Trask's hold and rose, gasping, above the surface.

Fortunately for Clark, because of Lois's actions, this exposure to the rock had been shorter than the time in the shed. During the time in the shed, Jonathan had inadvertently left the box open and that had prolonged Clark's exposure. He didn't have his super-powers just then, but because of the shortened exposure he was still strong, and thanks to the sunlight, growing stronger by the minute. His strength was possibly not quite up to that of an ordinary Earthman, but the older Trask unexpectedly found himself on the wrong end of a beating.

Little by little, Clark's youth and strength prevailed and he was able to batter down Trask's defenses and get in some telling blows. Finally, Trask was becoming groggy and was at Clark's mercy. They were standing in chest high water and Clark was poised to deliver a blow that would have knocked Trask out, when seeing just a pathetic beaten man he stopped abruptly.

Clark stood poised with his fist cocked for what would be the final blow and Trask, seeing all of his plans going up in smoke, shouted, "Go ahead, Superman! Kill me. I would have killed you!"

Realizing how far he had sunk, approaching Trask's level, Clark became disgusted with himself. Lowering his fist, he said, "That's not the way I work, Trask." Clark grabbed Trask's arm and dragged him to the edge of the pond where he left him kneeling on the ground. Clark left him and walked over toward the shed as the sirens grew louder.

As soon as Clark's back was turned and he was walking toward the shed, Trask rapidly came to his feet, showing that his apparent defeated state was a ploy. A chrome-plated double-barreled derringer materialized in Trask's hand. He was leveling it at Clark's back when Lois shouted, "Clark! Look out!"

The sirens in the distance were the deputies approaching. While the fight had progressed, unnoticed by the two combatants, Rachel Harris, with Jimmy Olsen, had pulled into the yard. Rachel had just stepped out of her car, and when she heard Lois shout, she saw the danger. Pulling her sidearm, she sighted and fired without thinking.

In response to Lois's warning, Clark started to duck. Lois's scream distracted Trask, causing him to jerk slightly just as he pulled the trigger and fired both barrels. As Clark was ducking, Trask took the bullet from Rachel's gun, right in the center of

mass, very near the heart. It was a fatal wound. The impact of the slug drove him backward and his lifeless body fell back into the pond, the Derringer falling from his limp fingers.

Lois broke from her cover at the side of the shed and ran to Clark. Kneeling at his side, Lois pulled his body onto her lap and cradled it against hers. She gasped and started crying and calling his name as if it was a mantra. He was limp and his left side was covered with blood. She cradled his body weeping despondently.

Suddenly, having finally finished freeing themselves from the ropes, Jonathan and Martha were beside her. She bawled, "Oh, Martha, he's been shot. We need to do something!"

Inordinately calm in the face of the emergency, Martha knelt next to Lois and felt for a pulse at Clark's neck. She nodded and placed a hand on Lois's arm. She said, "He's alive."

Lois blurted out, "But he's been shot! He's bleeding!"

Looking at Jonathan, Martha said, "First aid kit."

Jonathan nodded and headed for the house.

Relief flooded over Lois when she realized Clark was alive, and looking around she spotted Rachel Harris. She said, "Thank you."

As Lois watched, Rachel holstered her gun and she noticed that Rachel looked somewhat dazed.

In shock at what she had done — she had just shot and killed someone for the first time — Rachel knew that the memory of that moment would haunt her for the rest of her life. Even though her father had been elected sheriff, she had been a farm girl. Everyone in the county had that as their roots. She had seen animals slaughtered, that was run-of-the-mill, but a person? That was a different story. She knew that she still had a job to do and that she needed to pull herself together, so once her weapon was holstered, she shook her head to clear it and concentrated on what she had to do. She could remember what she had done and think about it... later.

A few seconds later, just as Jonathan was returning with the first aid kit, a couple more police cars pulled up near them. In the back were the two agents that Trask had sent to patrol the perimeter. Patrolman Cooper stepped out of one of the cars and took in the scene. The patrol cars looked like they had been through a war. There were bullet holes in the windshield and doors. He said, "Sheriff, what do you want us to do with these guys? They put up a fight, but we had more ammo so they finally gave up."

Having gotten herself back in control, Rachel said, "Let's see what we have and then we'll decide."

Lois was still kneeling on the ground cradling the injured Clark in her lap, crying inconsolably, mumbling Clark's name over and over, and rocking back and forth while Martha applied first aid.

Rachael said, "Coop, stand by until we have the details." Then she turned, and addressing no one in particular, asked, "Okay, what do we have here?"

Jonathan replied, "Well Sheriff, if you look in the shed you'll find Wayne Irig still tied up. We were in there with him until a minute ago. He's still unconscious. I wouldn't strike any matches around here for a while. Trask tried to murder us by setting the shed on fire. I guess you can smell the gas. He was about to murder Clark and would also have murdered Lois if he hadn't been stopped. That fella, Trask, was obsessed to the point of insanity with the destruction of Superman. He was beating on Clark because he thought that would draw Superman to his rescue."

Sheriff Harris turned to the deputy asked, "Coop, could you have one of the men retrieve the body? It's in the pond."

Coop pointed to Trask's body and said, "Hank, could you pull him out?"

After a few seconds, Lois was able to speak again and she was nearly frantic as she said, "Sheriff, over at the Irig farm, they are

packing up to move. You need to get over there and stop them. Don't let them get away!"

In almost a state of shock at this revelation, Rachel replied, "I have other cars responding to Wayne's farm."

Lois spoke up, "Sheriff, Carol Sherman, the woman over on the Irig farm, was duped into participating in this. Once she found out the truth, she only participated under the threat of death. She was worried about her little girl. She helped me escape. I'm sure she'll testify about what she saw. Maybe she could be classed as a material witness. Go easy on her, okay?"

Rachel said, "I'll do what I can. You may need to testify on her behalf."

Before moving Trask, the medical examiner would have to be called, so the Sheriff went into the shed to check on Wayne Irig. The Sheriff needed to see what was there so she could give eyewitness testimony. She called Jimmy over, "Mr. Olsen, do you have your camera handy?"

Jimmy replied, "Yes I do, Sheriff. What do you need?"

"Could you take some crime scene pictures for me?"

"Sure thing, Sheriff, just tell me what you want."

Rachel had Jimmy take pictures of Wayne before she untied him, of the gasoline trail, and of Clark in his wounded, depleted condition.

When Wayne came around he said, "That fella Trask, he wasn't EPA! He was with something he called Bureau 39. I overheard them talking. He injected me with some kind of babble juice and when that didn't work he started busting my fingers."

Rachel said, "Wayne, now, I want you to get yourself into the hospital and get those fingers taken care of and tell them that I need a copy of the report, you hear me?"

Wayne replied, "Right Sheriff."

Rachel turned to one of her deputies and said, "Hank, take those prisoners in and lock them up. Coop, you stay here with me. I'll need to go over to the Irig place and you'll be in charge here. Later, I'll give Mr. Olsen here a ride back to town. He left his car there."

Seeing that Clark had recovered consciousness, she moved over next to him, and kneeling next to him, asked, "How are you, Clark? You don't look the best. It looks like you need to go to the hospital too."

Weakly, Clark replied, "No, I don't think so, Rachel."

Martha spoke up, "I think one bullet just creased his arm. The other passed clear through his shoulder. It was bleeding a lot, but it has slowed down, thanks to some first aid. It was the pain that knocked him out. It was a near thing, but I think he'll be okay. I don't think there's anything they can do in the hospital that a little TLC can't do." Martha looked significantly at Lois as she finished.

Rachel moved over and stood above Trask. She said, "Don't touch anything." She raised her voice slightly as she said, "Mr. Olsen, before you go, I have **one** more job for you." Then she addressed her deputy, "Coop, call for an ambulance, please."

Jonathan spoke up, "When I went into the house for the first aid kit, I tried the phone. The line's dead."

Nodding, Deputy Cooper moved over to his car and got on the radio. When he finished he reported, "An ambulance is on the way Sheriff. I put in a call to the phone company too. They're sending out a line truck."

"Thanks, Coop. Stand by till they clean up."

"Will do, Sheriff."

Even though he was awake, Lois continued to hold Clark, cradling his upper body in her arms and rocking back and forth. Unashamedly, Lois showered him with kisses, tears of joy and relief that he would recover streaming down her cheeks while everyone else looked on.

Jimmy moved over and started taking more pictures. He made sure to catch pictures of the derringer as well as of Trask. Jimmy

was really earning his crime photographer stripes on this trip.

As soon as Jimmy finished up, Cooper went into his trunk and brought out an evidence kit. He donned a pair of rubber gloves and pulled out a plastic bag. He picked up the derringer and placed it in the bag, sealed it, and wrote the details on the outside. He did the same with the gun that Trask had dropped and with the ammunition. The bags all went into the kit and back into the trunk.

Rachel turned to Lois and said, "Lois, it sure looks like you have more influence over Clark than I ever did. You take care of him now, ya' hear?"

Lois looked at Clark, smiled at Rachel, and said, "I'll take care of him, Sheriff."

Coming out of her morbid mood somewhat, Rachel chuckled and said, "Lois, why don't you just call me Rachel. After all," Rachel nodded in Clark's direction as she continued, "We have something in common."

Lois looked again at Clark and pulled him to herself as she said, "Yeah, Rachel, I guess we do."

Rachel said, "I guess I'll see y'all later. I need to go check on the rest of my deputies and make sure we got the entire bunch." As she turned and headed for her car she said, "Mr. Olsen, could I trouble you for another task? I might need more pictures."

Jimmy smiled and said, "I'm all yours, Sheriff."

Rachel said, "Hop in and we'll go. When we're done, I'll take you to your car so that you can get to wherever it is you need to go."

"Thanks, Sheriff." Jimmy could see a promotion to staff photographer in his near future. "I'll be coming back here, at least briefly, before I drive to Wichita for my flight."

After a while the ambulance arrived. The EMTs looked at Clark's wounds. Seeing that the bleeding had stopped they applied some antibiotic ointment and redressed the wounds and put his left arm in a sling.

Using a body bag, they hauled away Trask's body by placing it on a long board and transferring it to a stretcher in the back. Wayne rode with the EMT in the back as they transported him to the ER to take care of his hand.

Deputy Cooper followed the ambulance when it left.

Lois let out the breath she had been holding in a loud whoosh. "Wow, that was a close one! He almost killed Clark. I guess that Rachel was a few seconds later than our Rachel. But now Lois knows The Secret."

"I see what you meant, he didn't exactly tell her, she just found out. I guess the way it worked out, there was no way for it to be avoided."

Lois added, "Yeah, what is she going to do with that knowledge now? Use it as additional leverage to force him to go through with the wedding?"

Herb looked at Lois and asked, "What would you have done?"

"I honestly don't know. The way it happened, I don't think I would have been mad. I think I would have understood."

Herb's response was an enigmatic, "We shall see."

Chapter 17

Once the telephone company line truck and Deputy Cooper, in the last vehicle, had left, Jonathan pulled some furniture off the porch and into the sunshine. Lois and Martha helped Clark over to a lounge chair and got him settled as they all sat down to talk.

Martha, unsure of how this was going to go and more than a little nervous, tried to break the ice, "Who would like some iced tea?"

Jonathan was the only one who would have expressed an interest, but seeing that no one else was interested, he decided to wait.

Since that conversational gambit had failed, there was an uncomfortable silence until finally Martha said to Lois, "You must

have a lot of questions.”

Now that all of the excitement was past, things were different. There had been a not too subtle shift and Lois was very subdued. Gone was the self-assured, take-charge Mad Dog Lane. Now, she was behaving like a puppy unsure of how her master would react to her misbehavior. Lois looked at Clark, and in a subdued tone, replied as she looked directly at Clark, “A couple. Who are you? Are you Superman or Clark Kent?”

“Lois, I am... I have always been... Clark Kent. I grew up, right here on this farm, as Clark Kent, son of Jonathan and Martha.” As he said this he used his uninjured arm to point to his parents. As he did, they in turn smiled at him. “I went to Smallville High. I was the Crow’s star quarterback. I made friends, like Pete and Billy, I dated — you’ve met Lana and Rachel — I did all of the normal things that a child growing up does. Nothing different, at least until my powers started to manifest, and then things changed. Certain things changed, relationships changed. Remember when you met Lana? That thing that Lana mentioned... I had decided that I needed to tell the woman that I was considering marrying about what I could do. She was the first person I told about myself.”

Lois nodded and said, “That’s why she said that.”

“Yeah, and she knew what I had decided. It never got to that point with Rachel, she doesn’t know about me. Superman, well, Superman is a disguise. Actually, you gave me the idea. Remember the underground gas line explosion ... the worker who was trapped down there?” When she nodded, indicating that she remembered the incident, he continued, “I went down another manhole and saved him, but it wasn’t as dark as I thought it would be, and he recognized me. I had to call his identification into question by saying that he had been shaken up by the explosion. That was why, some months ago, I created Superman... so I could help people. Yeah, in the past, I had been helping, but it had always been from the shadows. I needed a way to help... out in the open, but I also wanted to have a life, my life... as Clark Kent. You gave me the idea after that incident. You suggested that I keep a change of clothes at the Planet.”

Things were not adding up for Lois. Some recent incidents needed clarification. “But you got a paper cut the other day. You were sick. Your allergies were kicking up.”

“Oh, right, the paper cut. I had forgotten all about that. Yes, that happened. I wasn’t faking it. I didn’t have my powers then, like now.”

“But, why?”

“That rock: it took away my powers. It’s what made me sick. When we arrived the other day Dad wanted to show me something and took me out while you were upstairs with Mom. I had never seen it before, and when Dad took me out to show me what they were after over on Wayne’s farm, I was accidentally exposed. It was a complete surprise. Suddenly I was feeling pain... unbearable pain. I’ve never felt pain like that in my life. I passed out. Dad didn’t know what was happening and when he saw me in distress he just tried to help me. He didn’t think about the rock and left the tool box open which just served to extend my exposure. From that minute until we were in the back of that van, I was as powerless as any normal man. In fact, for a while, I was weaker than a normal man as evidenced by my failure on the test of strength. If Trask had shot me, I’d have died just like any normal man.”

“The allergies?”

“I guess you could call it an allergy. I’m allergic to that rock. According to Trask it is a fragment of my home world.”

“So, you don’t have your powers now?”

“No. Once again, I’m just like any normal man.”

“How long will that last?”

“After that first time it was days. This was a shorter exposure, but coming right on the heels of the other one... it’s anybody’s

guess. You got it away from me so my exposure was shorter this time, but there is no way to know how long the effects will last.” He thought for a few seconds and then asked, “What did you do with it, by the way?”

Lois smiled and replied, “I didn’t know what else to do with it, so I buried it. I didn’t want Trask to find it and get it near you again.”

“You’ll have to show Dad where it is so that he can dispose of it.”

“Sure, no problem, but how will he dispose of it?” She looked over at Jonathan for the answer.

Jonathan replied, “When Wayne gave it to me it was in an old lead toolbox. I think they use lead shielding in nuclear reactors, so the rock must be radioactive, and lead must contain the radiation that harms Clark. I think they left that old toolbox of Wayne’s behind. I’ll put it back in that and seal it up, tight. Then, once Clark has his powers back, he can deal with it.”

Lois transferred her attention back to Clark as she asked what to her was the most important question, “Okay, now... why?”

Clark looked pained as he asked, “Why what?”

“Why did you agree to marry me? It really is illegal and it goes against everything that Superman stands for.”

“It’s only illegal if was truly a fake, fraudulent marriage and as far as I’m concerned, it won’t be, so it is at most only half fake.”

“But I’ve been so mean to you. I took over the editor’s office and made you into my lackey. I walked all over you. How could you want to marry me?”

“You acted that way because you were unsure of yourself.”

Lois thought for a few seconds before asking the next question. “Why didn’t you tell Rachel or me your secret? When we were reporting partners, we were close, closer than I have ever been with anyone else. I was starting to think of you as my best friend.”

“I thought so too. But just when we were getting the closest, you backed away, then we were promoted to editors and things started to fall apart.”

“Yeah, I started to get scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“Of getting too close. You get too close and you are in a relationship. If you are in a relationship then it can lead to marriage and the divorce and I don’t want to be in a failed marriage like my parents’.”

“Not all marriages end in divorce.”

“I know, but I’m afraid that mine will. I don’t know if being told your secret would have made a difference or not. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I needed to be sure. It is a dangerous secret and not one to be bestowed lightly.”

“How were you going to keep it a secret if we were married?”

He smiled and with a rueful chuckle said, “It would have been hard.”

“You would have kept making up excuses and walking out on me. How long would you have kept the secret?”

“As long as I needed to, but I hope it wouldn’t have been too long. I don’t think it would have. I actually think I know you pretty well. That chunk of rock, it was part of a meteor from my home world. You saw what it was doing to me and you risked your life to remove it. If Trask had spotted you he would have shot you. You saved my life by doing that. You risked your life to save mine. I can never forget that. Only someone who truly cared would have done that.”

“What did it do to you, aside from making you vulnerable, I mean? Are your injuries... permanent?”

“It was painful and it robbed me of my powers. Yes, it made me vulnerable,” he pointed to his shoulder as evidence of his vulnerability, “but last time, it was temporary. I can only surmise that this time it will be too.”

Lois gasped out, “Then you were telling the truth when you said that he really could have killed Superman. You were taking a big chance.”

“I had noticed that my strength was returning, so I figured that the rest of my powers would return as well. I didn’t know he had the rock.”

“But at that time you were vulnerable and didn’t know when or if your powers would return. That was a major risk.”

“I needed to do something. He had my parents. You were right there in the van with me and could have been discovered at any time. I had to keep his attention centered upon me to protect you.”

They were interrupted by the arrival of Jimmy Olsen.

Jonathan was the first to see the car when it turned off the road and entered the drive. He cautioned everyone to silence. Martha stood and said, “I’ll go get some tea for everyone.”

Lois stood and volunteered, “I’ll help you.”

The two women went inside.

Jimmy was all smiles as he approached the two men, and asked, “How are you doing, CK? Your wound really looked serious.”

Clark indicated the sling and said, “I’ll just have to wear this thing for a while, until the wound knits, then I should be as good as new.”

Looking around to assure himself that Lois was not within earshot, Jimmy said, “I’m glad to hear that.” Then in a conspiratorial tone, he asked, “What’s happening between you and Lois? Is the rumor true? Are you getting married?”

Clark smiled and replied, “Yes, the rumor is true. We are getting married. In fact, the ceremony is scheduled for tomorrow. You want to come?”

Disappointment in his tone, Jimmy replied, “I wish I could. I’d love to be your photographer, but Perry has me on a very short leash. I’m the only photographer available and he wants me back tonight.”

Martha and Lois came out of the house just then with a tray of glasses and a pitcher of iced tea. Martha said, “I don’t think we’ve been formally introduced. I’m Martha Kent, Clark’s mother.”

“Oh, yeah, hi. I’m Jimmy Olsen, hopefully soon-to-be staff photographer with the Daily Planet. I work with Lois and Clark.”

Jonathan spoke up, “And I’m Jonathan, Clark’s father.”

Shaking hands with Jonathan, Jimmy said, “I’m pleased to meet you.”

Lois asked, “What about the gang over on the Irig farm?”

“When the sheriff and I got there her deputies were trying to round them all up. They were putting up a fight. Talk about the gang that couldn’t shoot straight: that was them. Anyhow, the fight continued until the sheriff got on her loud-hailer and told them that their boss was dead. When they heard that they all threw down their weapons and surrendered.”

“What about Ms. Sherman?”

“The sheriff gave her a ride along with me into town. Before I left she had already called her little girl. I don’t think she is under arrest; more like a material witness.”

Lois released a relieved sigh and said, “That’s good. She helped me. She doesn’t deserve to go to jail.”

As Lois finished speaking, another car pulled up to the house and parked. When the driver exited, Clark saw that it was Mr. Ramsbottom and he became apprehensive. Mr. Ramsbottom saw them all sitting in the yard and approached.

He stopped near Clark and noting the blood and the sling, with a curious tone, asked, “What happened to you?”

In an irritated tone, Lois answered for Clark, “We were doing an investigation.”

Surprised, he asked, “Are all of your investigations this dangerous?”

In a desultory tone Clark replied, “No, not all of them.” His tone changed to challenging, “You didn’t come all this way to see

how we conduct an investigation. What brings you all the way to Kansas? Is it something that couldn’t wait until Monday?”

“I told you I’d be checking up on you. I’ve been checking your phone records and you haven’t been calling each other, especially in the last two months.”

Mr. Ramsbottom was interrupted by Martha asking, “Would you like a glass of tea?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Martha poured a glass and handed it to him.

As Mr. Ramsbottom took a sip of tea, Clark said, “Mr. Ramsbottom, that really doesn’t mean anything. We work in the same office. My desk is right across from Lois’s. We don’t need to call. We don’t even have to **raise our voices** to make ourselves heard.”

After taking a drink, Mr. Ramsbottom sat his glass down and said, “I see, but I’m still convinced that this is all a sham. Now, I’m going to make you an offer and it’s only going to last for twenty seconds, so listen closely.” He pulled out a tape recorder before he continued, “You, Clark Kent, will make a statement admitting that this marriage is a sham or you’re going to go to prison. You tell the truth, you’re off the hook and she is going to go back to Canada, indefinitely. Are you going to take the deal?”

Clark looked at him with incredulity and said, in a tone of finality, “I don’t think so.” Clark’s tone bordered on anger as he continued, “You want a statement? Here’s your statement: Lois Lane and I have been working together ever since I started at the Daily Planet. In the course of that time we have spent most of our waking hours together. We have spent the nights at each other’s apartments on occasion. I have been in love with her all of that time. I’ll see you at the wedding.”

Mr. Ramsbottom stared at him in disbelief. “You’ve scheduled the wedding?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. It is tomorrow, right there.”

Indicating his bloody shirt and the sling, Clark added, “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve just been shot by a maniac. My parents and Lois were almost killed. We’d like to be left alone for a while.”

Properly chastened, Mr. Ramsbottom said, “All right. I’ll be seeing you later. You said tomorrow?” Clark nodded and Mr. Ramsbottom turned on his heel. Climbing back into his car, he headed out.

Having had a ring-side seat for this confrontation and not understanding all of the nuances, Jimmy asked, “Who was that guy?”

In a wry tone, Clark answered, “He works for the Immigration and Naturalization Service.”

“Why is he hassling you?”

“He doesn’t believe that Lois and I are getting married because we love one another. He’s convinced that it is simply to keep her from being deported.”

“Where’d he get that idea?”

Lois replied, succinctly, “Claude.”

Jimmy was shocked and said, “I didn’t think he’d go that far.” Clark snickered and said, “Apparently he did.”

Nodding in the direction that Ramsbottom had gone, Jonathan commented, “I don’t know where he plans to stay, but it won’t be anywhere in this county.”

Jimmy said, “Speaking of that, if I don’t want to get stuck in Wichita I need to get to the airport for my flight, but before I go, the Sheriff made arrangements with a local studio for me to use their darkroom. I have to develop and print the pictures I took for her before I can leave. I guess I’ll see you guys when you get back.”

“So long, Jimmy. We’ll be back in a couple of days. We will be calling Perry, but if you see him before we call, tell him what happened and that we are taking some sick time.”

As he stood to leave, Jimmy said, “I’ll be sure to tell him.” Nodding in the direction of the recently departed Ramsbottom,

Jimmy said, “I hope that guy has to drive all the way to Wichita to find a room. It would serve him right.”

As Jimmy walked to his car, Lois and Clark both laughed at his comment, although Clark winced in pain and put his hand on his shoulder. He called to Jimmy as he was getting into his car, “Now I know what they mean when they say, ‘It only hurts when I laugh.’”

Jimmy waved and drove off.

Martha said, “Lois, the best thing for Clark right now is rest and sunlight. Come with me. We have some work to do. We need to get you ready for tomorrow.”

After Martha and Lois disappeared inside, Jonathan said, “You rest easy, son. I’m going to go clean up. That hay will have to be thrown away. I sure can’t sell it as cattle feed now. I also need to sluice out the shed to get rid of the gas.”

After Jonathan left, Clark rested and thought about all that had been happening to them over the last few days.

Clark dozed in the sun, waking periodically and looking around. After cleaning up the shed, Clark saw Jonathan hauling corn stalks and Christmas lights into the barn. He was curious as to just what that was all about, but had other things to occupy his mind.

As the sun was going down they all gathered for dinner. Lois helped the wounded Clark to eat.

Martha pointed out that because of his wound, Clark should probably sleep on the couch instead of in the bed with Lois. “If you or he gets restless in the night, it could aggravate his injury. He’d probably be better off on the couch.”

Lois nodded her understanding and as they were going to bed, Clark looked at Lois and asked, “See you in the morning?”

Shyly, Lois nodded her head in response before going upstairs to the bedroom.

There were a couple of reasons that Clark slept on the couch that night. First, he needed to be off the floor, so he opted for the comfort of the couch. Second, it was bad luck to see the bride before the wedding.

Martha had changed his dressing a couple of times. The blood had stopped flowing and the wound had shown signs of accelerated healing. The hope was that some more exposure to the sun would help complete his healing.

Clark spent a long time in thought. He was worried about the outcome the next day. Would Ramsbottom have people there to put him in cuffs and take him to prison? He immediately discounted that as there had to be due process. There would need to be a trial if nothing else and he could appeal any decision that was made.

Mostly, he didn’t want to have to say goodbye to Lois. He wanted her in his life.

Lois spent an almost sleepless night. Now that she knew Clark’s secret, she was elated to think that she would be marrying Superman, but was it right? She had, after all, blackmailed him into it. He claimed to love her, but she didn’t know exactly how she felt about him. The old fear of a failed marriage still haunted her. There were so many women that threw themselves at Superman: how could she compete? Would he cheat on her? How could she stand it if he did? She was forcing him to perform an illegal act which went against everything that he stood for as Superman. Admittedly, he was doing it as Clark Kent, but that just begged the question since she now knew that Superman and Clark Kent were one and the same. How could she make Clark commit an illegal act, forcing his dual identity to do the same thing?

Because of the argument she was having with herself and her conscience, when she finally drifted off to sleep it was in the wee hours of the morning and she still hadn’t come to a conclusion.

She finally awoke to the light that was streaming in the window. The same window from which she and Clark had looked out at all of his friends as they performed the Charivari. His friends... he had such very nice friends, and his family. She was growing to love Martha, her gentle manner, and her wisdom. Her acceptance. To be the mother of Superman she had to be super herself. And Jonathan, his quiet, gentle ways, so unlike her own father, and again, so accepting of her. She felt almost... no, not almost, she felt ashamed for having put them in this position.

Finally, she knew what she had to do and steeled her resolve to do it. In order to save Clark, it would have to be done publicly.

Typical of Kansas at that time of the year, with the speed and unexpectedness of a tornado, clouds had rolled in and rain was threatening, so it appeared as though the decision to hold the ceremony in the barn had been warranted.

In the morning, while Martha helped Lois, Jonathan was busy in the barn. In a short while Lois heard a noise and looked from the window. As she watched, a couple of pickup trucks pulled up, and Pete Ross and Billy Eck started unloading folding chairs and tables and carrying them into the barn.

While Pete and Billy worked, Jonathan came into the house to help Clark get dressed. The white sling stood out in sharp contrast against the dark material of his suit, but that couldn’t be helped.

Lois interrupted Herb, “Wow, they are in a real pickle. It looks like as soon as they say their ‘I Do’s’, Mr. Ramsbottom will have Clark arrested and Lois deported. What was this decision that she made? Is she going to go through with the wedding?”

Clark added, “What about Clark? That was an open threat that Ramsbottom made. He was still convinced that it was a fake marriage just to keep her from being deported. He told them in so many words that if they married he was going to have Clark arrested. It would be awfully suspicious if Superman disappeared for five years while Clark was in jail. There are a lot of people that would put two and two together.

Herb chuckled, “We are dealing with the female mind, don’t forget, but more importantly this is Lois Lane. Lois, what would you do in this situation?”

“Really, Herb, I don’t know. I might have left in the middle of the night and driven to Canada. Is that what she did?”

“I guess I’ll have to tell you some more of the story.”

Chapter 18

Since Clark was downstairs, Martha brought Lois a breakfast tray. When she did, all Lois could think of was the other day when Martha had done the same for them as a couple. As she was picking at the food, she was remembering how it had felt serving Clark, even the comment she had made about serving **her husband** and learning to cook so that he **wouldn’t leave her** for someone who **could** cook, and she started to tear up. She was thankful that Martha had not stayed in the room, because while she ate, she found that she was choking back tears. She simply picked at her food in a distracted fashion while trying to rein in her emotions. After Lois had finished her breakfast, she had just managed to get her emotions under control before Martha returned to help her get into the gown.

The gown was an antique white because of its age. It had been pristine white when Martha had worn it more than thirty years prior to this day. Because Lois was a little taller than Martha the train was shorter, but that suited Lois, who was happy that at least she wouldn’t be tripping over the hem. She didn’t know how, but Martha had managed to let out the bust slightly so that she didn’t feel squashed. It actually felt like it had been made for her now.

There was no veil so Martha had created a crown of flowers picked fresh from her garden. Martha had used more flowers from the same source to create a bridal bouquet for Lois to carry. It was

unique; a bouquet encompassing rustic charm and delicate elegance. Martha had used her artistic flair to create a bridal bouquet composed of softened burlap and white roses, with shimmering rhinestones and classic pearls which Martha had hot-glued to the burlap. The delicate bundle was wrapped in a creamy satin ribbon allowing Lois to carry it with ease.

With Martha's help, Lois had pulled her hair into a French twist. A couple of curled whips of hair, thanks to Martha's curling iron, dangled on each side, framing her face but leaving her long elegant neck bare. Standing in front of the old-fashioned wood-framed full-length mirror, Lois took in her appearance as Martha did some final straightening. Turning away slightly to face Martha, Lois asked a bit nervously, "Do you think Clark will like it?"

Martha finally stood back and said, "Lois, you could be wearing a gunny sack and he would still think you were the most beautiful woman in the world." Stepping close, Martha placed her arm across Lois's shoulders and her other hand on Lois's arm, and standing next to her, turned her so that she was again looking into the mirror. As they both looked at their reflection in the mirror she said, "That being said, you are a very lovely bride."

Looking down in embarrassment and a pang of guilt, Lois replied in a quiet tone, "Thank you for all that you have done for me, but I really don't deserve it."

Martha shifted around until she had her arms around Lois in a hug as she said, "Don't even think such a thing. You do deserve this."

Lois had been having doubts about what she was doing and they had crystallized just that morning. Lois thought, <How could she be so kind to me? I'm marrying her son under false pretenses, but she doesn't know that. Clark obviously hasn't told them what is really happening. Clark deserves a better wife than me — someone who truly loves him.>

Lois was close to tears which Martha misunderstood. She said, "No, you really don't understand. You shouldn't be this nice to me." Then she added, "I'm sorry."

Martha brushed it off by saying, "What is there to understand or to be sorry for? It's my pleasure to do these things for you. After all, you are marrying my son. You are going to be my daughter-in-law in just a short while." Suddenly, Martha was distracted, her smile faded as she concentrated on something. She muttered, "Something blue." Suddenly getting an idea, Martha rushed out of the room only to return a minute later. She handed Lois a small packet. As she did, she said, "I've had this for years. There was a time, early in our married life when we, Jonathan and I, play-acted. This was... one of my... props."

Curious now, Lois opened the package and found a blue garter made of fancy lace. She looked at Martha, a question in her eyes.

Martha flushed and said, "Don't ask. Let's just say Jonathan and I enjoyed the garter and leave it at that."

As Lois slid the garter onto her left leg and up to her thigh, Martha said, "Let's see: something old and borrowed, the gown; something blue, the garter; something new... You need something new."

"The bouquet is new."

"Okay, we'll go with that."

While Lois had been preparing, Clark had also been dressing and having some difficulty because of his injury and the sling. Jonathan had needed to return to the barn after Pete and Billy had finished so that he could add some finishing touches that Martha had prepared.

While all of this was going on, Maisie had pulled up with a van filled with the food for the reception. Glancing at the sky as she stepped from the van, she said, "Let's hurry up and unload. I don't know how much longer this rain will hold off."

The waitresses — girls who had attended school with Clark, although most had been in classes behind him — also carried

plates and cutlery. Seth, Maisie's oldest son, carefully carried the three-layer white wedding cake from the bakery. He placed it on a table, that Pete Ross had delivered to the back of the barn and then helped unload the rest of the food.

Once Jonathan had finished in the barn and turned the management of the preparations over to Maisie, he had gone into the house to help Clark get ready, and it was a good thing that he had. Clark was still weak from the exposure and his wound and getting dressed had pushed him near to exhaustion. With Jonathan's help he was able to finish dressing and sit down to rest until the preacher arrived. Jonathan kept a lookout for his arrival.

As the time neared for the ceremony, Mr. Powell, the visiting preacher, was the first to arrive, and he pulled in just as Maisie was moving the van. When they saw him drive up to the house, Jonathan and Clark went out to meet him and conduct him to where the ceremony was to be held. Jonathan pulled one of the folding chairs up to the front so that Clark could sit and rest and chat with Mr. Powell until the guests arrived. Mr. Powell was curious about Clark's injury so Clark passed the time by telling the story of their investigation.

Mr. Powell listened attentively making exclamations at all the right places, so Clark knew he was telling the story well.

Shortly after that the guests started arriving. The front yard very quickly took on the aspect of a used car lot, populated mostly by pickup trucks, and people dressed in their finery streamed into the barn. When it started to fill up, Clark replaced his chair and stood near the pastor, waiting for his bride-to-be to enter.

Finally, it was time.

Seeing the lowering sky, Martha and Lois, with Martha carrying an umbrella, exited the house and headed at a rapid pace for the barn, hoping to beat the rain. Holding the umbrella, just in case, Lois waited outside while Martha went in and sat down.

When she did, Jonathan came out. He asked, "Since your father can't be here, could I have the honor of escorting you down the aisle?" He proffered his arm.

Lois smiled as she wrapped her free arm around his and said, "Thank you."

Inside, Pete Ross pushed the play button on a tape player and the strains of Pachelbel's "Canon in D" started to play. As it did, the guests all stood and turned to face the rear so that they could watch the bride as she came up the aisle.

Hearing the music, Jonathan and Lois started to move. Just as they stepped inside the doors there was a flash of lightning and crash of thunder which drowned out Pachelbel briefly. Everyone was looking toward the doors when the lightning flared, silhouetting Lois and Jonathan in the doorway and painting them with a halo. As if that were the signal the heavens opened and rain started cascading down. Since they were now inside and the rain was behind them, Jonathan leaned the umbrella against the door frame and as he did, as a result of the lightning strike, the lights in the barn flickered.

As they entered the barn, the lights came back on and Lois caught her breath. Appropriate to the season, framing the doorway and creating a corridor into the center of the barn were bundles of corn stalks. Wrapped around them were strings of white Christmas lights, twinkling like fairy lights. Once they were past the last set of cornstalks the floor of the barn was filled with folding chairs full of people. Again, Lois caught her breath. On either side of the rose petal covered aisle were five rows of chairs. The chair at the end of each row had a small bunch of flowers tied to the side; flowers that Lois recognized as coming from Martha's garden. The lovely scents floated through the air welcoming all those present. She was amazed. She didn't know when Martha had found the time to do all of this. With a pang of regret she wished Perry, Alice, and yes even her family could be there. Lois recognized some of the people she saw as she moved up the aisle as friends of

Clark's or as people that Martha had introduced her to in town. One individual she recognized was Mr. Ramsbottom. Seeing him only served to firm her resolve. After seeing Ramsbottom, Lois pasted a smile on her lips, and looking straight ahead, her eyes locked on Clark. He was standing just off center. She actually found it hard to believe that he was smiling.

When they arrived at the front, she took her hand from Jonathan's arm. She looked at him and said, sincerely, with a tightening of her throat, "Thank you."

He smiled in reply and sat next to his wife.

Turning back to the front, Lois stepped up next to Clark and they both faced the minister.

Mr. Powell began, "Friends, we are gathered here to join this man and this woman in the bonds of holy matrimony. Before we start I must ask if there is anyone here that objects to this union."

Hesitantly, Lois put up her hand.

Quietly, he asked, "Do you have a question?"

She glanced at Clark and then at the minister and hesitantly said, "No. No, not a question."

"Then why do you have your hand up?"

"I... I do have something... something I need to say."

Confused by what was happening, the minister asked, "Can it wait until after?"

Steeling herself, she looks sideways at Clark, shook her head and said, "No, not really."

Noticing that sideward glance and becoming concerned, in a worried tone, Clark asked, "Lois, what are you doing?"

Lois looked at him once more and then turned to face the audience. Fighting to maintain her composure, she said, "Friends, I want to thank all of you for coming. I have something to say; actually it's more along the lines of a confession..."

Concerned with what was happening, with some urgency, Clark took a half step in her direction and said, "Lois, don't."

Lois ignored him and continued, "Not all of you know that I am Canadian." She paused for that to sink in, "Yes, I am actually French-Canadian and I'm here on an expired visa. Your government was planning to deport me." She paused and looked around the audience and saw concerned looks as she continued, "Clark has always had an extraordinary work ethic, probably something he learned from you." She looked significantly at Jonathan and Martha as she said this and before she continued, "I really love my job and I wanted to stay in this country, so I blackmailed Clark into marrying me." Her voice started to break and she almost choked on the word blackmail, but she managed after a second to continue.

With some urgency, Clark hissed, "Lois, stop."

She could see Ramsbottom and that he had a notebook out and was rapidly taking notes. Seeing that only reinforced her resolve. She pressed on and ignoring his plea, she said, "I knew how much he also loves his job, and I told him that if I was deported he would lose his job as well." She turned to Clark and said, "Clark, you have a lovely family." She turned and swept her gaze over the assembly before she continued, "Your friends are also very nice and supportive. I wish that when I was growing up, my family and friends had been more like yours, but they weren't." Turning back to Clark she said, "Clark, this was a business deal. You fulfilled your part of the bargain. I release you from your obligation. I just can't allow you to get into trouble because of me."

The look on the faces of Jonathan and Martha was that of shock and dismay.

Finished with her statement, in the stunned silence that followed, she stepped away from Clark and started back down the aisle. As she passed Martha and Jonathan, with a very sad and forlorn tone, she said, "I'm sorry." And as she passed Mr. Ramsbottom she said, "Meet me at your car. You're giving me a ride to the airport."

As she hurried down the aisle, people came out of their shock

and pandemonium broke out. Fortunately, the brief downpour had almost stopped, so in the light drizzle that continued, Lois pulled up the hem of the gown, kicked off her pumps and picked them up, then running barefoot and trying to avoid puddles as best she could, hurried back to the house. People mobbed Clark and his parents, making it impossible for Clark to get away. Over the heads of the people around him he saw the smug look on the face of Mr. Ramsbottom as he stood, turned, and followed Lois out of the barn.

In his still-weakened state, by the time he was able to make it to the house he was almost worn out. Weakly he climbed the stairs only to find Lois's wedding gown laid out on the bed and her luggage gone.

There was a note lying on top of the gown addressed to "Clark." Opening it he read,

"Coquinos,

I couldn't go through with it. Knowing just who you are, I could not force you to commit an illegal act.

Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me. I will not tell anybody.

By the time you read this, I will most likely be on my way back to Metropolis with Mr. Ramsbottom.

I hope that sometime you will find it in your heart to forgive me.

Lois"

At the bottom was written, "Je pense à toi." {Thinking of you.}

As he was reading the note his parents came into the room to see him standing at the side of the bed.

Martha asked, "Clark, are you all right?"

He was distracted by what he was reading as he answered, "Yes. No. I don't know. Why did that make a difference?" He crumbled up the note and cast it aside, "What does it matter who I am?" He paused for a second, gathering his thoughts, "She called it a business deal. I didn't think of it as a business deal. Where does she get off saying that? That woman can be so irritating at times. When we were reporting partners, I thought we were becoming close. Then things changed, suddenly, and she started putting distance between us."

Martha interrupted and asked, "Why do you think she did that?"

"She said that she was afraid of being in a failed marriage like her parents had."

"Isn't that a realistic fear?"

"I suppose, but not with me. Can't she see that I will stay with her for the rest of our lives?"

"Sometimes fear blinds you to what is right in front of you."

"When we were promoted to editors she did everything she could to be the top banana. Now, this. She called me Coquinos. That's what the twins called me, but I don't think it means the same, coming from her."

Martha asked, "Where is she?"

"On her way to Wichita with Ramsbottom."

Jonathan asked, "Clark, do you really love her?"

"Yes, Dad. Yes, I do, heaven help me, I love her."

"Do you want her to be your wife?"

"With every fiber of my being."

"So, you're not going to let her go?"

"I'll follow her to Montreal if I have to."

With a sly smile, Jonathan said, "If anyone could do that, you could, but I don't think that'll be necessary."

Curious, Clark asked, "Why is that?"

The rain had started again as Lois rode with Ramsbottom to the airport. Stoically she stared out of the windshield as she asked, "Okay, what happens now?"

"Well, since you are leaving voluntarily, it all becomes very...

civilized. I'll give you a couple of days to get packed up and then you return to Canada."

Turning away so that he couldn't see her face, Lois stared out the side window at the rain and the passing fields of grain. These were the same fields of grain that she had commented on when Clark had first driven them to Smallville. That thought only served to bring Clark to her mind and what she had just done to him. Thinking about how much the weather matched her mood, she kept her head turned so that Ramsbottom wouldn't see the tears that made their way down her cheeks, and she gave vent to her grief, silently, except for the occasional sob.

Ramsbottom was insufferably pleased with himself and completely ignored Lois as he went on and on about how he was the best there was in the INS and how he 'Always got his man.'

Lois gasped out, "Oh, no! She left him at the altar? How cruel was that!"

Clark asked, "Wouldn't it have been kinder for her to have left in the middle of the night the way Lois suggested?"

Herb replied, "It might have been kinder, but the way she saw it, a public admission was her best way of protecting Clark."

Lois commented, "She obviously felt bad about it, but it is too late to undo what she has done. Frankly, it looks to me as though she really is in love with Clark. She wouldn't have been crying if that weren't the case."

Curious, Clark asked, "How did they get out of this situation? It looks like Clark has a plan. He can follow her to Montreal, or the ends of the Earth if necessary, but it looks like Jonathan has something up his sleeve. I wonder what that could be."

"Why don't I continue the story and maybe you'll understand how it was managed."

Chapter 19

The flight from Wichita landed in Metropolis late Sunday. Fortunately, Lois had not had a seat near Mr. Ramsbottom, but as they de-planed Mr. Ramsbottom told Lois that she would have forty-eight hours to leave for Canada. She was so emotionally and physically exhausted by the time she arrived at her apartment that without even changing she just kicked off her shoes, curled up on the bed, and fell asleep. It was not a restful night's sleep. She was plagued by dreams: dreams of green rocks and Clark writhing on the ground with Trask gloating over him, or of Clark fighting Trask and Clark being shot, or, worst of all, of cradling Clark's limp form on her lap and having his blood all over her hands. Several times she woke herself by shouting the warning she had in Smallville. Each time she did she would cry herself back to sleep. The times that she awoke from the dream of Clark in her lap, she couldn't shake the feeling that there was a figurative as well as a literal component to that particular dream. She convinced herself that if it hadn't been for her, he might not have been there, and he mightn't have been shot. By the time she arose in the morning and dragged herself into the bathroom to splash some cold water in her face, she had convinced herself that she had been the author of the entire fiasco. After the water, as she was drying her face, she looked accusingly at her reflection in the mirror and muttered, "All your fault. Your... fault," and started to cry.

On Monday, as is typical of weather patterns in the northern hemisphere, the rain that had been falling in Smallville had made its way to Metropolis, and that only served to reinforce her somber mood by reminding her of running in the rain from the barn, away from Clark and from her wedding. Lois was a wreck.

She pattered around her apartment getting things ready to pack, but her heart was not in it. So many things seemed to be impossible to move. So many pieces of her life that she would wind up leaving behind. The thought that one of the things she was leaving behind, perhaps forever, was Clark, brought back the sobs of the previous day's trip to the Wichita airport.

Mr. Ramsbottom hadn't given her enough time to call in a professional mover. If she had only accepted the inevitable and had begun her packing when she had first been notified that she was being deported this wouldn't have been so insurmountable a task, but no, not Lois Lane, Lois Lane could see to it that she wasn't deported. She would make sure that it was her will and not that of the government that won out.

Then the plan she had to come up with just had to involve the world's superhero, of all people. The man who stood for law and order... she stopped what she was doing, collapsed on her sofa, and put her face in her hands and cried, no longer able to contain the deep sobs that wracked her slight frame. She cried until she didn't think she could cry any more, but every time she thought about Clark, the floodgates would open again.

Throwing herself down prone on her sofa, the self-recrimination and self-loathing for what she had done were overwhelming, and she gave full vent to her grief. She finally convinced herself that she would never see him again. He would undoubtedly have to remain in Smallville, recuperating from his wounds, and she would be gone long before he made it back to Metropolis. He would never follow her to Montreal. Why would he even consider that after what she had done to him? Eventually, he would forget her entirely.

Forcing herself to move, she packed up just the essentials, deciding that she would have to contact a mover and ask Jimmy to act as her agent after she had left. Having made that decision, she called a mover and scheduled the move of her household goods for later in the week, and then called and made her flight reservation for the following day.

Tuesday, after spending another restless, dream-filled, virtually sleepless night, Lois was in the editor's office, removing her personal items and boxing them up for shipment to Canada. No amount of makeup could hide the fact that her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy from crying, but she tried to put on a brave front, daring anyone to mention it. That morning she had finally resigned herself to the situation, and the work of packing up her things had given her something else to think about, at least for a time. Finally, looking around and seeing nothing else to pack, she picked up one of the boxes, stepped out into the pit, and called for Jimmy.

She was near her old desk when he was finally standing in front of her. She handed him the box and said, "Please have this and the other boxes shipped to this address." She tried to hand him a slip of paper with an address on it, but since his hands were occupied with holding the box, in frustration she finally placed it on top of the box he was holding.

As she was speaking, the elevator chime sounded, unnoticed by either of them. Jimmy was looking over her shoulder and a look of surprise overtook his features. Lois was still giving directions when he interrupted, "Ms. Lane, Lois..." Once he had her attention, he nodded his head in the direction he wanted her to look, behind her and over her shoulder.

When she turned around she saw Clark, descending the ramp into the pit, and her heart did a flip-flop in her chest. He was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and still wore the sling. He was breathing heavily as he gasped out, "Hey."

Surprised and elated at seeing him again, but trying to hide it, Lois asked, "Clark, why are you... panting?" Seeing that and knowing that Superman was never out of breath, she knew that his powers had not returned as yet.

As if stating the obvious, he said, "I've been running."

She was surprised that he had come all this way, still in his injured condition, and actually pleased that he had, but she steeled herself and her resolve. She couldn't allow him to sacrifice everything he stood for because of her, so sarcastically, she challenged, "All the way from Kansas?"

Shaking his head, he replied, "No, just the last few blocks

from the airport. The cab got caught in a traffic jam, but I couldn't wait. I needed to talk to you."

In an attempt to control the emotional upheaval that his appearance had caused in her, shaking her head, she turned away so that he couldn't look her in the face and see her puffy eyes and know that she had been crying. Starting to move closer to Jimmy, she said, "Yeah, well, I don't have time to talk. I have to catch a 5:45 to Montreal."

Clark said her name, "Lois," in a normal tone of voice. Ignoring him, she continued to fire orders at Jimmy. "I need the boxes to go out today. I need you to make sure that everything is sealed..."

Raising his voice, Clark shouted, "**Lois!** Stop talking!"

Startled at his tone of voice, Lois immediately stopped talking, but remained turned away from him.

In the background, an unidentifiable voice shouted, "That's it, Clark! Show her who is going to wear the pants in the family."

Their exchange had grabbed the attention of everyone in the newsroom and they were all staring as the scene unfolded.

Shocked, Lois had stopped talking to Jimmy and had glanced around the room. As she did, everyone dropped back into their seats. Without saying a word, Jimmy quietly backed away to get out of the line of fire.

In a calmer tone, Clark said, "Please turn around, I need to say something."

Lois muttered, "Okay," as she turned toward him and crossed her arms, not caring if he did see her eyes now.

"This will just take a second."

In a tone with some asperity tinting it, Lois said, "Fine. What?"

"Five days ago, I didn't know just where our relationship was going or if we even had a relationship. Then we had our little adventure in Smallville and things started to change. There was a major change when we kissed at the dance. There was another change when you told me about your tattoo. There was an even bigger change when you checked me out when we were both naked."

Color tinged her cheeks at the memory of that moment, and faint wisps of hope were starting to enter her world; the world that had so recently seemed so hopelessly lost.

There were some embarrassed snickers from the staff and the voice everyone recognized as Ralph Pinado crowed, "Naked!"

The color in her cheeks belied her sincerity as she tried to deny what had happened, "I didn't see anything..."

Seeing her colorful cheeks, Clark knew the truth and confronted her with it, "Yeah, you did." He paused for a second, as if deciding how to proceed, then said, "I didn't realize just how much closer we had gotten... until I was standing alone... in the barn... wifeless." He took a deep breath before he continued, "Now, you can imagine my disappointment when it dawned on me that the woman I love was about to be kicked out of the country."

What Clark said wasn't lost on her. She was hearing every single word, and Lois started to shake and look scared when he said the 'L' word, and as he continued.

Clark slowly stepped closer to her as he spoke, "So... Lois... marry me. Because I'd like to date you."

Cat Grant was looking on in disbelief and shock at what was happening. Denise from research had her hands clasped and a smile on her face. Eduardo was watching in rapt attention. Jimmy had set the box down on Lois's old desk and stepped away, still watching the drama unfold. Steve from sports had a satisfied expression because he, of all the staff, had seen this coming. It had been his voice heard earlier. All eyes in the bullpen were on them.

The fear that Lois was feeling made her shake her head and look around before she pushed an errant strand of hair behind her ear and said, in a low tone, barely above a whisper, "Trust me. You really don't want to be with me."

There was sincerity in his tone as he said, "Yes, I do."

Lois shook her head again and swallowed hard before she said, in a subdued tone, "You see, the thing is, there's a reason why I've been alone all of this time. I'm comfortable that way and I think it would just be a lot easier if we forgot everything that happened and I just left. That way we can't be in a relationship and then have a failed marriage."

Clark heard her out and nodding agreed with her, "You're right." Stepping forward he halved the distance between them and said, "It would be easier."

They were face to face, staring into each other's eyes a bare foot apart, and Lois started to tremble with emotion. She shook her head from side to side and then finally whispered, "I'm scared."

Clark whispered back, "Me too." Even though he was still wearing the sling, he stepped forward, and closing the final distance between them and placing his hands at the sides of her face, he guided her into a kiss, the same way he had in the back of the van.

As the kiss progressed, Lois first stopped trembling, and then as the kiss continued, she started trembling again, but from a different cause. Her arms circled his neck and she parted her lips.

Finally breaking the kiss, Lois caught her breath and whispered, "Aren't you supposed to get down on your knee or something?"

With his lips barely touching hers, he whispered back, "I'll take that as a yes."

She whispered back, "Oh. Okay," just before he pulled her back into another kiss.

Just then the elevator dinged and Perry stepped out, breaking the spell of the moment. Spotting Lois and Clark in the middle of the pit, he said, "Hey, hey, hey. This is a newsroom, not the tunnel of love. All right, the two of you, my office. Note the use of the possessive pronoun... **my** office."

Properly chastised, Lois and Clark followed Perry to the editor's office. Because of where they stood, Perry could not see the sling. As he stood beside the desk, he said, "Look, I'm sure that you will be disappointed to hear that the suits upstairs decided that I could return to the editor's office permanently. That means that the two of you are back on the city desk, at least as long as Lois is with us. Are you going to be with us?"

Lois looked at Clark and said, "I'm not sure. We still have to deal with Mr. Ramsbottom. He's not going to appreciate hearing what we will be telling him."

Perry was curious, "What are you going to be telling him? I thought that the two of you were engaged."

Clark spoke up, "Yes, we were. Then we were going to be married."

Perry interrupted, "That's what being engaged usually means, that the couple is getting married."

Clark tried to explain, "We were shortening the engagement, somewhat. We were supposed to be married on Sunday."

"Whoa, let me check my calendar. I don't want to miss it."

Clark chuckled, "You already did, Chief. It was last Sunday. That is, it was, until Lois left me standing at the altar."

Perry looked at Lois accusingly, "Why did you do that?"

In a small voice, Lois replied, "There were some... problems."

Perry asked, "Are there still problems? From what I saw a minute ago, it doesn't look like it."

Clark replied, "No, Perry, no more problems."

"Okay, then straighten out the paperwork with Rams-whatever and get back to work."

Clark was staring into Lois's eyes as he said, "We do have an announcement for you, Perry."

He brightened up, "Oh, what is it?"

"**We are** married."

Lois was startled, "What? I thought we just got *engaged*,

again."

As they stepped apart, Perry saw the sling that Clark had on and shouted, “What is that? Why are you wearing a sling?”

Clark lifted his arm, “Oh, this thing? I got shot. Didn’t Jimmy tell you?”

“Jimmy! I’ve been so tied up upstairs that I haven’t seen Jimmy. How did you get shot? I thought you were in Kansas for your parents’ anniversary! Does this have anything to do with why you needed a photographer?”

“Yes, it does. It’s a long story, Chief. A very long story.”

Lois interrupted Herb again, “What did he mean that they were married? He just asked her to marry him. That means that they are engaged.”

Clark agreed, “It sure sounded like he meant it, but how could that be? She stopped the ceremony.”

“As I said, there are some differences between the universes. The events that occurred in Smallville when you went to investigate that EPA cleanup were not the same. In your case, Perry sent you on the investigation. As I related to you, there was yet another universe where I stepped in to give Lois some of her future memories. They were sent on the investigation as you were, but the outcome was going to be different. In this case, they were not sent by Perry. They were not even there on an investigation; it just fell into their laps. Originally, they were there because of Clark’s parents’ anniversary and to tell them about the pending nuptials. So, is it inconceivable that they could be married?”

Lois sputtered out, “But they didn’t go through with the vows! They didn’t get that far.”

“What is Mr. Ramsbottom going to do?”

“Ah, Mr. Ramsbottom... he was going to be a problem.”

Addressing Lois, Perry said, “Lois, I need you to...” He stopped in mid-sentence as he looked around and saw that Lois had packed up her stuff, and said, “Oh, I see you already have. Thanks for clearing out. Now I can bring my Elvis pictures and other stuff back down here and hang them up.” Sitting behind his desk, he looked back and forth between them and said, “When I first was offered the job upstairs, I thought that it would be a step up. Regular hours and all of that, but you know what?” He gave them a second to answer, but when none was forthcoming, he said, “I missed being down here. It was too quiet up there. Not enough action. They didn’t really need me up there anyhow.” Leaning back in his chair, he said, “Okay, you said you had a story to tell. Let’s hear it.”

Clark began, “Okay, Perry, remember when we were invaded by those rogue government agents?”

Perry nodded that he remembered.

Clark continued, “Well, they were in Smallville.”

Perry slapped his desk and said, “What? Why were they there?”

“They were searching for a rock that they thought they could use to kill Superman.”

“They didn’t, did they? Find the rock, I mean?”

Lois looked at Clark with fear in her eyes as he replied, “They found something, but we don’t know if it would kill Superman or not. Personally I don’t think it’s a good idea to test that particular theory.”

Lois’s look went from a look of fear to a knowing look. He had answered the question without giving The Secret away, but he hadn’t lied to do it. Hearing that she realized how many times he had done something like it since he had joined the Planet. Belatedly, the puzzle pieces were falling into place.

Clark started telling Perry about the events in Smallville, and as he did, Perry had a thoughtful look. Before he finished, Perry said, “Okay, you two. Get that written up and on my desk.”

“Perry, we have something else we have to do first. We still have to deal with immigration.”

“Oh, yeah, Mr. Rams-whatsisname, okay, take care of that then work on that story.”

“We will, Perry, we will.”

When they arrived at the INS building, they asked to see Mr. Ramsbottom. They were shown to his office and after a short wait, he joined them.

“Ah, Lois and Clark. Lois, your flight is in a short while, isn’t it?”

Lois nodded and then he continued, “What can I do for you?”

Clark reached into his sling and pulled out some papers. He said, “I have something here.” As he unfolded the papers, he turned to Lois and said, “Lois, I need you to sign,” he pointed to the lines and said, “here and here.” Being helpful, Mr. Ramsbottom handed her a pen.

She thanked him for the pen and used it to sign the papers. Clark then signed the same papers, and then turning them to Mr. Ramsbottom and pointing to a line on one of the documents, he said, “Mr. Ramsbottom, if you could sign right... there.”

Mr. Ramsbottom signed, and as Clark gathered up the papers, he said, “Thank you,” as he returned the pen.

As Clark was returning the papers to the sling where he had carried them, Mr. Ramsbottom asked, “You’re welcome. What were those papers?”

Tapping his sling where the papers now resided, he said, “Those papers? Oh, those papers were our marriage license application and certificate of marriage. You just signed as witness.”

Mr. Ramsbottom and Lois blurted out in unison, “What?”

As Clark was reaching into his pocket, he stated, “Lois and I are now married.”

Lois asked, “How?”

Lois was staring at him in incredulity as Clark pulled his hand from his pocket holding a small packet. After he pulled the small packet from his pocket he unfolded the tissue paper and then taking her left hand, Clark slipped his grandmother’s ring on her finger as he explained, “There’s an old law still on the books in Kansas. It dates back to the settlement of Kansas as a territory. You see, there were so few ministers and JPs that a law was written that says if a couple spends a night together, they are married. Well, you see, while we were in Smallville, we were in the same room, together, for several nights, so there’s no question. Under the laws of Kansas we are... married.”

Mr. Ramsbottom had started to become angry as Clark had made his explanation. He started to reach for his phone as he said, “Okay, then I guess you leave me no choice. Shall I call the police or do you want to try and convince me that you are serious?”

Clark spoke up, “Mr. Ramsbottom, we are serious about this marriage. I... we want to make it work. Now, here’s something for you to consider: you just signed both of the documents which confirmed our marriage. If you chose to prosecute us then you will also be prosecuted because you are now an... accessory.”

The phone fell from his fingers to clatter to his desk as Mr. Ramsbottom blanched at this statement. “What did you say?”

“I said that by signing that document you became an accessory and if you chose to prosecute us, you will also be charged.”

Mr. Ramsbottom was stunned by this outcome. Now he dropped into his chair, his legs too weak to sustain him, and muttered, “Charged... accessory. How did this happen to me?”

Clark said, “You know, you really should read something before you sign it. Thank you, Mr. Ramsbottom; it’s been a pleasure dealing with you.”

In his stunned state he waved a hand and said, absently, “All right. Okay. You win. I’ll file the necessary paperwork.”

Lois said, “Thank you,” as they exited.

Once outside the building and on the sidewalk, at just about the exact spot where Lois had knelt and made her unusual

proposal, she started to giggle. “I can’t believe that you did that. Are we really married?”

“Yes, we are. All legal and binding under the laws of Kansas.”

“How did it happen?”

“After you left, my parents and I had a talk. They knew that I loved you and really wanted to marry you and that you really loved me too.”

“How did they know?”

“The only reason you would have done what you did was if you actually loved me. You didn’t want to put me in the position of breaking the law because you cared that much.”

“That was why it took me a couple of days to get back. My parents and I had to go to the courthouse. They had to testify that we had spent the nights together, in the same room, in their house. The judge tried to give us a hard time. I almost had to call in the group that did the Chivaree to testify. He finally agreed and provided the proper paperwork. All I needed to do was have it signed. It wasn’t until a short while ago that I thought to have Mr. Ramsbottom sign as witness. Originally, I was going to ask Perry.”

Lois looked at the ring on her hand and asked, “Where did this come from?”

Clark looked her in the eyes and said, “My mom gave it to me for you. She’s been saving it for me. It was my Grandma Clark’s wedding ring. It’s been in the family... a long time. You were going to be wearing it on Sunday.”

“I love it.”

“It’s yours now.”

“You know, we never discussed where we’d live, I mean seriously. I mean, I have two bedrooms, but we only need one, and you were right, your place is more homey than my place.”

“Okay, we can move your stuff in immediately.”

“But what about that other thing?”

Mystified, he asked, “What other thing?”

Looking around to make sure they wouldn’t be overheard, she said, “Your part-time job?”

“Oh, that. We’ll adjust. First, we need to get back to the Planet and get this story typed up. That’ll make Perry happy. We also need to rescue your boxes before Jimmy packs them up and ships them.”

“Were you serious?”

“I’m always serious. About what?”

“About wanting to date me.”

He pulled her in with his good arm and said, “I’ve never been more serious about anything in my life. Lois... I was telling the truth to Mr. Ramsbottom when I said that I’ve been in love with you from the first moment. You have to give me a chance to make you love me. I know you do, sort of... not as much as I love you yet, anyhow. I do want to date you. How about we start with dinner... tonight?”

Coyly, Lois replied, “I think I’d like that.”

Lois asked, “Well, was that it? And they lived happily ever after?”

Herb shook his head and said, “Not exactly.”

Clark asked, “What happened with Luthor?”

“Once they were back at the Planet they wrote up the story about Smallville. They avoided any reference to the rock.”

“You mean the Kryptonite.”

“Right, we know it as Kryptonite, but they had not named it at that time. Once that story was filed they started looking into Luthor. Lois remembered the illegal arms and they started to dig into it. They found Miranda when she used her pheromone spray on them. She was arrested for that and then Lois connected her to the arms deal. They made her a deal and she testified against Luthor. Luthor went to jail, but he didn’t stay there long. There were some criminals in prison with him that he had used as fall guys. He had promised them a big payoff when their time was up.

Seeing him in there with them they realized that their promised payday was not going to happen and they took it out on Luthor. He was dead within three months of being convicted.

“I guess the next major incident occurred some time later. There was a call about a baby in a well... but that’s a story for another time.”

“Oh, Herb!”

“Tut, tut. I have delayed your departure on your vacation too long as it is.”

“What happened to them?”

“They had a number of adventures, many of them similar to those which you have been through. Suffice it to say that after a rocky start, things worked out.” Standing, Herb pulled a small device from his pocket and started pressing buttons. After a few seconds, he retrieved his hat, and after placing it on his head, hit the final button. A portal opened in front of him and as he stepped through, he said, “Ciao.”

Stepping down off the pad in the transfer room of TTEMPO, Herb looked around at the bustle of activity as agents came and went. As he started to move to his office, he mused to himself, “That was a rather abrupt departure, but it couldn’t be helped. If I had delayed their vacation any longer there is no telling how badly I could have altered the timeline. They needed to get to Smallville so they could prevent that terrorist group from carrying out their plan and then it was during that vacation that Jon was conceived. Who knows what problems delaying that could have caused? I must needs be more careful in the future.” (See Borrowed Time — Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 2)

Chapter 20

Lois and Clark went back to the Daily Planet after leaving the INS office. Because Clark’s arm was in a sling, Lois did the majority of the typing as they worked on the story. Clark’s chair was at her right elbow the entire time, with him editing her copy, and for once she didn’t object. After a couple of hours, Lois sent the story to Perry. As soon as she sent it they went to his office.

As they entered, he said, “Have a seat while I look this over.”

They sat on the sofa, side-by-side, with Clark’s right hand in Lois’s left.

When Perry finished reading, he sat back in his chair and said, “Wow, that’s some yarn. So, Trask won’t be bothering us anymore.”

“No, Sheriff Harris took care of that problem for us.”

“What was he actually doing there? You left out that little detail.”

Lois was the one who replied, “We need to leave that out of the story. Look, it was this way: he was looking for a meteorite from Superman’s home world. Rachel Harris gave us the report she found when she was going through his paperwork. She asked us to give it to Superman after we convinced her that if it became general knowledge it could be dangerous to him. This rock emits a high-band radiation which Trask thought would be harmful to Superman, and maybe even kill him. We don’t want that to happen, so we want to withhold that part of the story. You never can tell what some people would do with that kind of information.” Lois thought for a second before she continued, “You know, we’ll have to go back to Smallville. I still have to testify on Sherman’s behalf. She helped me escape so I could go to Clark. I’m sure she knows what Trask was after, but I think that once I impress on her how important it is to keep that rock a secret, she won’t say anything.”

“Okay, but without that piece, your story lacks the punch it could have.”

“That’s okay. Better off this way. It needs to be kept a secret.”

“Okay, it’s your story. Clark, how is your shoulder?”

“It’s getting better, Perry. It may take some time to completely

heal. I was shot on Saturday and this is only Tuesday.”

“Okay, why don’t you take some sick time and rest up. Didn’t you say that you two are...”

“Married. Yes, we are.” Clark held up Lois’s left hand to display her rings. “If you don’t mind, we’re going to take off. We need to move Lois’s clothes. We’re going to live in my old apartment, at least temporarily. If you need us, call us there, but don’t call tonight.” He looked at Lois and then said, “We’ve got a date scheduled.”

“Whoa. Don’t most couples date... before they get married?”

Clark snickered and asked, “Since when has Lois Lane done anything the normal way?”

“Yeah, I see what you mean. How long do you think you’ll be wearing the sling?”

“I don’t know, Perry. A week or two. Shouldn’t be too long.”

“Okay, take the rest of this week as sick leave then come back half-time until you are completely healed. Lois, I think you need some R&R after your ordeal as well, and besides, you need to take care of your husband. And don’t think of this as your honeymoon. You can take that later. This is medical leave.” He winked.

“Thanks, Perry.”

Lois and Clark spent a couple of hours moving her clothing from her apartment to his. He made room in the closets and chests for her things. By the time they were finished, they were both weary. Clark’s powers had not returned as yet so they decided to order in. After calling for pizza they settled on the sofa. Lois sat at a distance, unsure about the situation. She was a little scared, as she had said previously. In a way, she felt relieved. Even though she had enjoyed being the editor and the prestige derived from that position, it was a relief to be back together with Clark as partners. It had been her fear of committing to a relationship with him that had driven her to relegate him to a subservient position in the office. That way she could keep him at arm’s length.

Now, however, she was confronted with the fact that, here they were, together and married. She had realized how wrong her behavior had been, and had decided to do the right thing; one of the hardest decisions she had ever had to make. She had been attracted to him that first day, in Perry’s office, and it had scared her even then. Then Perry had teamed them up, which had led to late nights together, shared meals of take-out, and working closely, and the more they had worked together the more her attraction had dominated her thoughts.

There had been many nights when they had been going over story notes and she had felt the urge to throw caution to the winds and herself into his arms. Her fear of any relationship ending, the way her parents’ had ended, had always kept her from doing it.

Now, the way she felt, if this marriage went the way of her parents’ she knew that she would be devastated. She dearly wanted this marriage to work and she resolved to do everything she could to make that happen.

Coming to a decision, she cautiously shifted her position so that she was closer to him.

Clark asked, “Would you like to watch a movie? I think I have Lethal Weapon.”

Lois asked, “You’d do that for me?”

Smiling, he replied, “If my wife likes a particular actor, why can’t I show her a movie with him in it?”

“You wouldn’t be jealous?”

“Why should I be jealous? You’re my wife now, not his.”

Lois looked down at her left hand as if to reassure herself, and seeing the ring, smiled and said, “Yeah, your wife. I’d like to watch it... with you.”

“Okay then. One movie, coming up.”

He stood and moved to the movie rack, selected the cassette and inserted it into the player. Using the remote he turned on the TV and settled back on the sofa as the opening credits rolled.

The pizza arrived, and Clark retrieved a cream soda from the fridge for Lois and a Coke for himself. They ate while they watched the movie, and when they were finished, Lois moved closer, actually leaning against Clark’s right side. He put his right arm across her shoulders while the movie played.

When the movie finished, Lois impulsively turned around and kissed Clark. She said, “Thank you. That’s one of my favorite movies.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for the future.”

Starting to feel more comfortable with Clark, Lois shifted position, lying down on the sofa with her head in Clark’s lap. “I was wondering: how much longer until you have your powers back?”

Thoughtfully, he said, “It shouldn’t be much longer. The wounds in my shoulder and arm are almost closed and I think I can just about hear your heartbeat. That’s one of the earliest signs.”

“Hearing my heartbeat is one of the early signs? Why is that?”

“My hearing was one of my first powers to manifest so it comes on the earliest. Why your heartbeat – well, there’s just something about your heartbeat. It is special to me. That first day in Perry’s office was the first time I ever heard it, and for some reason, my hearing locked on it. From then on, whenever you are in range, I’ve been able to hear your heartbeat. I can tell your mood from the way it is beating.”

“What’s my mood now?”

He listened for a few seconds and said, “You seem to be relaxed.”

“Yeah, I am. I can’t believe it, but I am. I thought I’d be nervous, my wedding night and all.”

“Lois, you know, I won’t force you to do anything. I’ll wait as long as you want to. I’m a v — very patient person and I’ll wait until you are ready.”

Lois yawned and said, “I think it’s time to get ready for bed. Do you need any help, you know, with your shoulder?”

“No, I think I can manage. Do you want me to sleep on the sofa?”

As she was sitting up, she looked at him and said, “I don’t think so. I think we may as well start getting used to sleeping together. I can’t promise anything will happen...”

“Like I said, I’m very patient.”

“Good. Let’s get ready for bed.”

Sometime around two in the morning, Lois woke up because she was suddenly cold and Clark was not spooned against her back. She reached behind herself and the bed was empty and the covers were gone. Glancing up, she saw the blanket hanging in the air above her. She gasped out, “Clark?”

Hearing his name and her voice awakened him and he plummeted back to the bed.

She screeched when he fell, almost on top of her, but quickly collected herself. “What was that all about?” she challenged.

He was contrite as he answered, “I guess my powers have returned. I was floating in my sleep.”

“Is that going to be a regular thing?”

“It usually only happens when I’ve been stressed or if I’m very happy.”

“Which is it this time then?”

Smiling he replied, “Oh, I’m happy. Very happy.”

“What are you happy about?”

Staring into her eyes he said, “You, here, in bed, with me, as my wife.”

“So, I guess I’m going to have to put up with that, what, every night?”

“Maybe. There may be times when you’ll float along with me.”

With a wicked grin, she replied, “Something for me to look

forward to. How can we keep you from falling on top of me?”

Smiling, he said, “We will need to fall asleep in each other’s arms. That way, if I float, you float too. Marital togetherness.”

She mulled this over for a minute, and then lying back down, said, “Let’s give it a try, I need some more sleep.”

Snuggling together, Clark wrapped her up in his arms and they fell asleep again.

The next time she awoke she felt like she was sleeping on air. Looking around she realized that that was exactly what was happening. She still had Clark’s arms around her, her right leg was looped over his, and they were floating four feet above the bed. She thought to herself, <A girl could get used to this,> and smiling, she fell back to sleep.

The next couple of days were spent moving Lois’s things from her apartment. She had called and cancelled the move to Canada so they were using her Jeep. Some items were put into storage, some were moved to Clark’s, now their, apartment, and the rest were donated. Moving the fish tank was an elaborate production. The fish were captured and segregated into individual containers for the trip. Superman picked up the tank and flew it to Clark’s apartment. He returned to Lois’s apartment and Clark and Lois moved the remainder of her things.

Another chore was changing her driver’s license. They made a stop at the INS office and gave Mr. Ramsbottom her new address. While there they applied for her green card. Lois expressed her intent to apply for citizenship at her earliest opportunity.

Seeing them together, Mr. Ramsbottom was reassured that this was no longer a fraudulent marriage. They did look happy together. He was still disappointed that they had pulled a fast one on him, but as they were leaving he wished them well.

A few days later, Clark mentioned, “You seem to be settling into married life. You look comfortable. I just want you to know that, whenever you are ready, just say the word and we’ll go on a honeymoon. Anywhere in the world you want to go.”

She squeaked out, “Really? Anywhere?”

Nodding he said, “Anywhere. We’ll go by Superman express.”

Smiling she said, “That can be a real money-saver.”

“And always first-class. Sorry, there won’t be any in-flight meals, but then the flights will always be short.”

In a small voice, Lois asked, “Could we ...”

“Could we, what?”

“Could we ... go for a flight? Now?”

Smiling he replied, “I’ve just been waiting for you to ask. Where do you want to go?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Anywhere.” She thought for a second and then said, “How about Smallville. I want to apologize to your parents. It has been a few days and I really owe it to them.”

“Lois, you don’t have anything to apologize for. They helped me arrange for the marriage documents. They knew how we felt about each other even before we did.”

“Then I want to thank them for their understanding. I want to tell them how happy I am... married to their son, having them as my in-laws, being part of your family.”

“They are happy to have you as a part of this family. Yes, we got off to a rocky start, but that is all behind us now.” He stepped away from her and said, “Stand right there.”

She looked at him quizzically.

Suddenly he started to spin, turning into a blur, and changing from denim blue and black to bright primary colors. When he stopped spinning, Superman stood there in place of Clark Kent.

She breathed out an exclamation, “Oh, wow! That’s how you do it?”

Like a kid showing off for his girlfriend he smiled and said, “Yeah, neat, isn’t it?”

“I’ll say.”

Taking her hand he led her to the balcony then picking her up they took to the sky. Passers-by could hear a faint, “Wheeeeeee,” which diminished with distance as they climbed into the sky.

When they landed at the Kent farm they were greeted at the door by Martha. As soon as she saw Lois she opened her arms in invitation and Lois moved into the offered hug. When she did, she started to cry. Martha said, “I hope that those are tears of joy and not sadness because I am happy to welcome my daughter-in-law into our home.” Behind Lois’s back, Martha twirled her finger.

Seeing this cue, Clark spun back out of the uniform.

Lois nodded her head and said, “I’m happy. I’m so happy. Thank you. Thank you, so much.”

“Is he treating you okay?”

Nodding, Lois said, “Better than I deserve after what I did to him.”

“Oh, honey, if he had objected he wouldn’t have gone along with it. Come on in, let’s get comfortable.”

They moved inside and sat on the sofa. Once they were all settled, Martha asked, “Well, how did it go with Mr. Ramsbottom?”

“Clark fixed that.”

“Oh, how?”

Clark explained, “I had been planning to have Perry act as our witness, but at the last second, I changed my mind.”

Martha was confused. Lois had said that it was taken care of and now Clark was saying that the documents were not witnessed. “Okay, how did you work it out?”

With a sly smile, he said, “I decided that there was someone else that could be our witness.”

Lois started to laugh as she said, “He had Mr. Ramsbottom act as witness!”

Martha started to laugh. She asked, “How did you get him to do that?”

“Human nature. Most people, if you hand them something and ask them to sign it, especially if they have seen you sign the same thing, will not bother to read it. I had Lois sign, then I signed it myself and asked him to sign. As I had hoped, he didn’t read it first; he just signed.”

“When Clark told him that since he was the witness he would be tried as an accessory if they prosecuted us, Mr. Ramsbottom was speechless.”

Martha looked Lois in the eyes and asked, “Are you okay with this? Being married to Clark, that is?”

Lois looked at Clark, smiled and said, “Yeah, I’m okay with it. It is going to take some getting used to, but yeah. He has promised me a honeymoon, anywhere in the world.”

Martha looked at Clark and said, “That’s a promise only someone like him could make.”

“I know, and I’m going to take him up on it.”

Clark added, “We’re going to date for a while, first.”

“That sounds like a good idea. You don’t want to just jump in. You need to check the water level first. Are you kids staying for dinner?”

Lois replied, “I’d love to and I’m sure Clark wouldn’t object.” Lois looked back at Clark and said, “Why don’t you go see what your father is doing?”

Taking the hint, Clark said, “Why don’t I go check on Dad?” He stood up and left the room.

Once he was out, Lois asked, “My mother was an alcoholic and was never very good around the house. Martha, I’ve always lived alone. I have always been busy and relied on take-out. My mother never taught me how to cook.” She looked around to make sure Clark had really left before she continued, “The other day, when you brought in those cinnamon rolls, I don’t know why, but it hit me that I don’t want him to leave me for a woman that can cook. Could you teach me?”

“Lois, if he leaves you for someone else it will not be because you cannot cook. Frankly, knowing my son, he’ll never leave you, no matter what. If you’re serious about learning to cook, I can give you the basics, but I’d suggest that you talk to Clark. He is an excellent cook. It can be a lot of fun cooking together. It can strengthen a relationship.” She smiled and ended with, “Trust me, it can be fun.” This time it was Martha’s turn to look around before she finished, “You’d be surprised how many times sex starts in the kitchen.” Martha thought for a second and then patted Lois’s hand and said, “Wait right here.”

Martha bounced up and went upstairs. When she came back downstairs, she returned to her place on the sofa. She looked around again and then reached into her apron pocket. When she pulled her hand out she reached over and placed an object in Lois’s open palm. As she did, she said, “Here, we’re getting kind of old to be doing things like this. I think it’s your turn.”

Looking down, Lois saw that the object was the garter that Martha had given her to wear on her wedding day. Martha folded Lois’s hands over it and said, “Have some fun.”

Lois blushed and said, “Martha, I can’t take this.”

“It would please me if you would. It’s like a relay race. I’m passing the baton.”

It had been over a month since they had been married and in that time Lois and Clark had taken every opportunity they had to date like any other normal couple. They were settled back into their roles as investigative journalists and were enjoying that time working together. They had successfully participated in the capture of a hit man who Lois had witnessed killing one of his targets, and prevented an ecological tragedy. In that incident, Superman had needed to save her when the gunman tried to shoot her. Lois and Clark had also defeated a woman who thought of herself as the greatest magician in the world and who was intent on enslaving the world’s people via subliminal messaging. In that incident, Superman had rescued Lois from a sealed chamber as it was being flooded with water.

The fact that it was her husband saving her life in these circumstances was not lost on Lois. Through this time they were living together and sleeping in the same bed and doing all of the ‘normal’ things a married couple did, with one exception. Finally, one evening as they were cuddling on the couch, Lois came to the realization that she desired more: a deeper, more complete relationship with Clark, a true marriage, with everything that went along with that. As they were watching a movie she was thinking about it rather than the movie. Finally, during a commercial break, Lois said, “Clark, did you really mean it?”

Taken by surprise by this question, which obviously had nothing in the world to do with the movie that they were watching, he asked, “Did I really mean what?”

“Did you mean it when you said that we could go anywhere for a honeymoon?”

The fact that she was asking about this was getting his hopes up, and he said, “Yeah, I was serious.”

“Okay... look, here’s the thing... I think I’m ready, but... after all the trouble my trip to the Congo caused, I don’t want to go far. Let’s just book a weekend in the honeymoon suite of the Lexor.”

Smiling, he asked, “Are you sure, because I don’t want to push you into anything you are not ready for?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I’m ready to take that next step, with you. You’ve convinced me that you aren’t like other guys, well, you aren’t like any other guys, but I mean, I believe you... that you want this relationship.”

In a sober tone, he replied, “Lois, a long time ago, I decided that once I found the right woman, first, I would tell her about myself.” He gave a little chuckle before he continued, “We saw how that worked out. It wasn’t exactly the way I wanted to do it, but it worked out. Second, once I found her and we were married

it would be forever. There is no divorce, no do-over. I wanted permanence.”

Looking into his face, Lois said, “That has always been my greatest fear. My parents divorced, and I’ve seen so many couples separate that I was always afraid it would happen to me, and I didn’t want that. I have always wanted permanence, but was afraid it would never happen; that something would always go wrong and the marriage would end. You’ve convinced me that you want the same thing, and now it’s time to start... forever.”

Smiling, Clark replied, “Your wish is my command.”

The next day, Clark made the reservation.

Chapter 21

The following day, Lois sat down at her computer and composed a note to the Black sisters.

“TO: S.Black@DP.com ; C.Black@DP.com

FROM: L.Lane@DP.com

SUBJECT: *Coquinos*

Suzanne et Collette,

Très bonne nouvelle!

Coquinos et moi pourrions venir pour une visite. Je ne sais pas exactement quand, mais bientôt.

J’ai hâte de voir mes copines et je suis sûr que vous aimeriez voir Coquinos.

A bientôt.

Lois”

{Suzanne and Collette,

Wonderful news!

Coquinos and I could be coming for a visit. I’m not exactly sure when, but soon.

I look forward to seeing my girlfriends and I am sure you would like to see Coquinos.

See you soon.

Lois}

Because of the time difference she didn’t receive their response until the following day.

“TO: L.Lane@DP.com

FROM: S.Black@DP.com

SUBJECT: RE: *Coquinos*

Lois,

C’est la merveilleuse nouvelle, la petite amie.

Nous avons hâte de vous revoir.

Suzanne”

{That is wonderful news, girlfriend.

We look forward to seeing both of you again.

Suzanne}

It was late on Friday evening. Jimmy, Cat and Perry were in the bullpen near the desks that Lois and Clark usually inhabited. Clark was typing away at his keyboard trying to finish up a Superman rescue story before they left for the weekend. Lois had just shut down her workstation and was clearing the debris of the workday from the top of her desk.

Now that the time had arrived, Lois was becoming anxious and asked, “How much longer, Clark?”

“Just a couple...”

“Hurry up! I’m anxious to get started.” Now that she had made up her mind that this was going to be a real marriage with all of the rights and responsibilities, she was truly anxious to get started, and the fact that her husband happened to be Superman only made her that much more anxious. Ever since she had made up her mind and told Clark that she was ready and he had made the reservation, she had been fantasizing about what it would be like to make love with him. She knew him well enough that she had no fear of being hurt by him, not even accidentally. With her extremely limited experience, sex had been uncomfortable at best, but this would be different. This would be with the man she loved,

not a pimple-faced boyfriend who left her hanging once he had satisfied himself. With a sigh, she reached down under her desk and picked up a cream-colored ladies weekender bag that she'd had hidden there.

Without even looking away from his computer screen or interrupting his typing, he said, "Be right with you, Lois."

"It isn't like you to keep me waiting." Lois grabbed her coat and put it on, and then she picked up her camel-colored briefcase and threw the strap over her shoulder.

Cat was wearing a leopard-skin top with a long black skirt that was slit up both sides toward the front to show off her legs as she walked. The top had sleeves, but the shoulders were bare with a low-cut bodice. She was walking by and stopped to ask, "You guys going somewhere?"

Smiling, Lois replied, "Yes, we are. That is if Clark ever finishes his story." She started to get an irritated tone as she asked, "Clark?"

Still typing, he replied, "Almost done."

Cat pressed the issue, "Where are you going?"

Lois gave her a non-committal smile.

As soon as Lois did that, Cat realized that something must be up or Lois wouldn't be so closed-mouthed. With barely restrained excitement, Cat said, "You've got a scoop! An undercover investigation?"

Her excitement was contagious, as was the subject matter. Jimmy offered, "It's the revolution in South America, isn't it?"

Cat, with a know-it-all look said, "Nuh-uh. The riots in Miami!"

Jimmy was so sure of himself and Lois that he challenged Cat, "Five bucks?"

Cat, also sure of herself, said, "You're on!"

They shook hands, sealing the bet.

Perry, knowing that all of this speculation could actually be on point, started to worry. He said, "Hold on now, Lois. I'll have to get this cleared with the budget office. Did you book your trip through the travel office?"

Lois was exasperated by this point and blurted out, "We are **not** going on a **story**! We do have a *personal* life, you know!" Lois was getting irritated at all of this prying into their personal lives and it showed in her tone of voice.

Perry, Jimmy and Cat just stood there aghast at this outburst. They were still used to the 'old' Lois, the one driven by her quest for the next Kerth, a Meriwether, and eventually a Pulitzer.

Finally, Clark chimed in, "She's right, folks. We do have a private life outside of this office. When we got married, I promised Lois a honeymoon anywhere she wanted to go. Because of all of the problems her travel outside of the States caused, she decided that she wanted to stay close to home, so I promised her a weekend at the Lexor."

Lois quipped, "Yeah, for a weekend of pure relaxation together with my **husband**... period. No pressure, no deadlines, no riots. Just Clark and me and we plan to make some memories." She just knew that they would be the best memories of her life to date.

Perry still couldn't believe it. He offered one last possibility, "Is it the prison break upstate?"

All of this speculation had pulled Clark away from his article, and thinking of the old adage 'a picture is worth a thousand words', he asked, "Do you want to see our reservation?" He pulled out a slip of paper and displayed it.

Cat grabbed it and read aloud, "It does say, wow, Honeymoon Suite!"

Lois reached over, closed her fingers on the slip of paper, removed it from Cat's unresisting fingers, and stuffed it into her bag. "Satisfied now?"

Cat quipped, "I never thought I'd see the day that Lois Lane would be found in the Honeymoon Suite of any hotel, let alone the

Lexor. I guess that the Ice Queen has finally thawed!"

Seeing that Clark had just finished shutting down his computer, Lois said, sarcastically, "It just took the right man, thank you very much. We're leaving now." She reached for Clark's arm and started dragging him toward the ramp.

Perry was still marveling at this profound change in Lois. He said, "Lois, you have to admit: the idea of Lois Lane spending an entire weekend **relaxing** is a little, well, far-fetched."

Jimmy and Cat nodded their agreement with Perry's statement. Lois smiled and replied, "That might have been the case BC, but not now."

Perry was mystified by the reference and asked, "BC?"

Lois looked at her husband and said, "Yeah, BC, Before Clark. Come on, honey, the Honeymoon Suite awaits." She handed him her suitcase and he took it in his free hand.

Perry just nodded his understanding.

As he was being dragged towards the elevator, Clark said over his shoulder, "Chief, I emailed that Superman story to you."

Always appreciative of Clark's diligence he shouted, "Thanks, son. You two go and have a good time."

Now that she was committed to this, Lois was anxious to actually, finally, consummate their wedding. They entered the elevator and, as Clark pushed the button, Lois said, "I'm sure we will," and turned to smile at Clark as the doors closed. As soon as they had closed and they were alone, Lois was in Clark's arms and they were kissing.

They took the elevator to the garage, and when the doors opened, they finally broke the kiss. They exited the elevator and moved to Lois's Jeep. Clark loaded Lois's bag into it while Lois opened the driver's door and climbed in. She had taken her suitcase into the bullpen with the intention of changing before they left, but they had run late because of the Superman rescue, and Lois had decided to just wear her lavender-colored work suit so that they could make their exit.

Arriving at the Lexor, Clark removed their bags from the back of the car while Lois turned over the keys to her precious baby to the parking valet.

When they approached the desk, Lois pulled their reservation slip from her bag and handed it to the desk clerk.

"Ah, yes, Mr. and Mrs. Kent. I have you in the Honeymoon Suite."

Hearing him say, 'Mrs. Kent', Lois started to smile, wrapped her arm around Clark's, and looked at him with adoring eyes. It was still so new, being Mrs. Kent, and she wasn't completely used to hearing herself called that. It sent a thrill up her spine because it reaffirmed that she was in fact married to this man, this very special, super man.

The desk clerk hit a bell and shouted, "Front!"

In response a bellboy almost magically appeared next to Clark.

The desk clerk said, tersely, "Honeymoon Suite."

Grabbing their bags, the bellboy said, "This way, please," and turning on his heel, led them to the elevator.

Exiting the elevator, Lois and Clark followed the bellboy down the hall. He stopped in front of a door and opened it. He set their bags inside and stepped into the hallway. Pulling a camera from his pocket he stepped back and looked at them expectantly.

Clark just looked at him and finally Lois got the idea and said, "I think he's waiting for you to carry me over the threshold."

A smile crept onto his face as he said, "I think you're right." Leaning down, he placed one arm under Lois' knees and the other around her back, the same way he carried her when they were flying. As he lifted, she leaned back into his arms and wrapped her arms around his neck. She leaned in and started a kiss.

Being very aware of the presence of the bellboy, Clark pretended to stumble as he crossed the threshold while holding Lois to the accompaniment of the flash of the camera.

Clark placed Lois back on her feet and then reached back to massage his lower back as if he had strained it.

The bellboy had an amused smile as he accepted the tip from Lois and said, “The pictures will be at the desk for you to pick up tomorrow. Enjoy.” He was snickering as he closed the door. <This beauty obviously chose a wimp to marry. Well, there’s no accounting for taste.>

As soon as the door was closed, Lois slugged him playfully and said, “You and I both know you didn’t hurt your back.”

He stood up straight and then started rubbing his arm where she had slugged him. “The honeymoon must be over already. That was spouse abuse,” and he started to grin.

Lois threw herself into his arms and said, “I would never abuse my ever-loving husband. I might love him to death though.” Even as she said it, Lois marveled at the changes that had been wrought in her since the incidents in Smallville. She had realized that she was, in fact, in love with Clark and had left him at the altar, so to speak, in an attempt to keep him from committing a potentially illegal act. She had decided to sacrifice her own happiness for his safety. At the time she’d thought that all she was giving up was her job and the ability to stay in the USA, but over the next two days she had come to the realization that she had given up oh-so-much more. She had given up on... love. The world, her world, had changed that Tuesday when Clark showed up, announced that they were married, prevented her from leaving, and rescued her from a loveless existence. Since that day, they had dated and drawn closer; closer than she could have believed she could be to any one person. There was just something about Clark that drew her to him. He had a quiet and gentle spirit, probably something he had learned from his parents, and he doted on her. He granted her every wish, and in many cases did so even before she voiced them. It was just little things, like donuts and coffee that were perfectly prepared every time. Dinners. Movies. Sleeping together, without being forced into something that she was not ready for. Always courteous and protective. He’d saved her life several times in the last few weeks alone. He was her personal guardian angel.

Breaking her reverie and scooping her up, he flew them into the bedroom. As soon as they passed through the door he stopped and they both gaped at what they saw. In the center of the room was a heart-shaped bed with a spread the color of Superman’s cape and heart-shaped pillows also in red with a white ruff around the periphery. Across the room was a lounge chair, wide enough for two, and a large screen TV. Over against the wall was a heart-shaped sunken spa tub right next to a large picture window made of smoked glass so that no one could see in, but which gave a panoramic view of the city. The spa had been prepared and had bubbles floating on top and steam rising from the surface.

Her surprise was expressed as a breathy, “Wow,” as she took it all in. Clark allowed Lois to reclaim her feet. Lois had never in her life been naked with a man — that is, with the possible exception of the time in Smallville when she had been returning, naked, from the shower, and had run into an equally naked Clark on his way to take a shower — but over the course of their marriage so far, she had been making an effort to overcome her modesty; not with the world, but only with him. Slowly she had been making efforts to at least partially undress in front of Clark. Making up her mind, Lois quickly removed her jacket and then reached up and started to unbutton her blouse. She threw the blouse on the bed, then unfastened her skirt and it followed the blouse. Standing there in bra and panties, she turned to Clark and started to babble, “I’m nervous. It’s my first time, well, not my **first** time, but it is my first time. The first, first time was with a boy, you know, the usual, in the back seat of his father’s car after a date and I didn’t enjoy it,

but he apparently did, but it was over so quickly and he said ‘thanks’ and took me home and I cried afterwards and he couldn’t even look at me again afterwards and that was the only time and should I really count that? I didn’t really want to do it then, but he was pressuring me and made me feel guilty for refusing so many times and this is different, so different. You are different. You haven’t pressured me and we’re married and... I want to do this.”

Her babbling ceased and she stood silent as she looked at him to see what his response would be.

Chapter 22

Realizing just what a big step this was for her and not wanting her to do something she was not ready for, he placed his hands on her shoulders and forced her to look into his face as he said, “Lois, I’d never pressure you to do anything. I want you to be who you are, not who I want or expect you to be. If you feel ready, then I am happy, but I want you to be sure this is the right thing to do. If you have any reservations, then we’ll wait longer.”

“No, no reservations, no qualms. I want to do this.” As she was speaking she reached behind her back and unhooked her bra. It hung suspended by the straps, still covering her breasts until she brought her hands around, and while supporting it with one hand, slid the straps from her shoulders with the other hand. She was watching his face the entire time and his expression was one of eager anticipation. Seeing this firming her resolve, and grasping the garment, she pulled it away and flung it aside to join the rest of her garments on the bed.

Blushing furiously, there was an instant of discomfort as she was finally standing before him in nothing but a pair of bikini panties. Feeling her resolve weaken, her hands started to move up to cover her breasts once more, but they stopped and she was relieved when he said, in a hushed tone, “Beautiful.”

Her hands were at waist level as in a quiet voice, she asked, “You really think so?”

Looking her in the face and speaking with utmost sincerity, Clark said, “Lois, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I still have a hard time believing that we are married. How did I get so lucky as to have you for my wife?”

As her hands fell to her sides she started to smile a relieved smile. She admitted, “I’ve never had a very good self-image. After what happened — you know — I thought he was disgusted with me... by what he had seen, which really wasn’t much because it was cold. Canada is cold most of the time, and this was in January, so all I did was pull up my skirt and push my panties down. I didn’t even take them off which added another layer of difficulty to what we were doing.”

Stepping forward, Clark cupped both of her cheeks with his hands and pulled her into a kiss to stop her babbling. When they broke the kiss, he said, in a husky tone, “Will you believe me when I tell you that you are beautiful?”

She gave a little hesitant nod, and looking down, closed her eyes as a tear slowly made its way down her cheek.

With his thumb he wiped the tear away and said, “Lois, you don’t have anything to cry about.”

“Yes, yes I do. You... you’re so sweet to me even after all that I did to you.”

Placing a finger under her chin, he raised her face to his and said, “I love you. Nothing you have done or ever could do will change that.”

“See, that’s just what I’m talking about. You’re just so... forgiving.”

He silenced her with another kiss.

This time her hands climbed his chest and made their way into the hair at the back of his head. She parted her lips and gave herself to the kiss. Their tongues started a slow tango. The material of his shirt was rough on her tender breasts, but at that point she didn’t care.

When they finally broke from the kiss, Lois pulled her hands down, and with a determined look started to unbutton Clark's shirt. As she did she revealed skin. She looked at it in surprise and asked, "No Suit?"

He smiled and said, "Not tonight. Superman is not going to interrupt us."

He helped her unbutton the rest of his shirt before pulling her back into another kiss, and this time all she felt was skin-to-skin contact. It brought to mind the incident in the bedroom when she had crashed into him when they were both naked, and she reveled in the memory and in the feeling of her skin against his bare chest.

Without breaking the kiss, her hands drifted down and loosened his belt and then the fastenings of his pants. They fell down his legs and pooled at his feet before they broke from this kiss. Stepping back, she looked him up and down. Licking her lips she said, "Yep, this is better. The Suit is almost as good, but not quite. I like looking at you in the Suit, but this is still better. Why is the Suit so revealing, anyhow?"

"Mom says it's to cut down on wind resistance," he cleared his throat before he continued because she was running her hands over his torso, "and it draws the eyes away from my face, which helps with the disguise." As he was talking he was watching her. She had a dreamy expression in her eyes as she ran her hands across his skin.

Leaning down, he captured her lips in another kiss. Breaking the kiss, she said, "I think we need to take this to the bed."

Without breaking the contact they moved sideways to the bed. They finally realized that they would have to separate to get onto the bed and moved as quickly as they could to lie next to each other.

Once they were on the bed, Lois stopped what they were doing, and when she did, she had an embarrassed look on her face. Sitting up, she asked, "You are... Superman, right?"

"You know that."

"Yeah, well, aside from the powers, what else is different about you?"

Mystified, he asked, "What do you mean?"

Hesitantly, she pointed at his groin and asked, "Down there. Are you different, down there?"

Clark half chuckled as he replied, "I don't think so. Nobody made any comments in the shower room after gym class."

"Oh, okay." In a small voice, she continued, "Can I look?"

Clark smiled and said, "I am your husband. You can look all you want. Although, watch out, I'm liable to claim the same privilege."

Now that she had his permission, she leaned down and pulled his briefs down. She said, "It's different from what I imagined."

He was surprised, "Different from what you imagined? I thought you said you had done this before."

Hesitantly she replied, "Yeah, I did, sort of. Like I said, it was at night, in the back of his daddy's car. It's cold in Canada so we didn't undress any more than necessary. There wasn't a lot of seeing, just some groping and..."

He said, "So, you've never seen..."

"Well, yes, in anatomy and physiology books, but it's different in real life."

She was almost mesmerized by the look on his face and the feeling of touching him. "How many times have you done it?"

He groaned as she touched him, and she stopped. She asked, "Am I hurting you?"

Quickly, he said, "Invulnerable, remember?"

She resumed her exploration of his skin as she said, "Oh, yeah, right, okay. You didn't answer me. How many times?"

"Well, that's just it. I never have."

She was shocked, "You never have? You've never been with a woman?"

He pointed out, "Remember your comment 'It isn't like you

were saving yourself for someone special.' Well, actually, I was. Because of what I can do, who I am, I couldn't take a chance and just sleep around indiscriminately. That wouldn't have been fair to the women. If there was a chance of pregnancy, they would need to know that it could be a superbaby. I would need to be involved in its life. It had to be **the** woman who I planned to be with for the rest of my life."

Finally overcoming the last vestiges of her embarrassment about her body, thanks to Clark's comments and compliments, and with the intriguing thought of having a superbaby, smiling, she started to push her panties off and asked, "Are we going to have a superbaby?"

"I don't know," Clark replied. "I don't even know if it is possible for us to have children."

As he ran his hands over her body, she could feel herself responding to his touch. She said, "This is so much better. I think I am ready. Please. I don't want to wait any longer."

That statement started a period of marital intimacy.

When they were finished, Clark placed his hands on her hips. He stilled her movement and said, "Let's have a soak," and nodded in the direction of the sunken tub.

She looked in the indicated direction, and smiling, she said, "Yes, let's." Hand-in-hand they moved to the spa tub.

The feeling of buoyancy that Lois had from the water came close to the feeling of being in his arms and floating or flying and the warm cocoon that the water provided was relaxing and very sensual.

Clark wrapped his arms around her and pulled her firmly into his chest, and her head fell to his shoulder while her arms went around his neck. After some seconds, she turned her face to the side and kissed the side of his neck where it joined his shoulder.

Feeling loath to break their contact, Lois released a contented sigh, kissed the side of his neck again, and then said, "HMMMMMM, you are one fantastic lover. I'm glad I have you under exclusive contract. I can just imagine if the word got out about just how wonderful a lover Superman is. I'd be beating the women off with a stick."

"No chance of that happening because I can't imagine this being as good with anyone else. With anyone else it would simply be sex. With you, it's making love. I love you so much."

Lois gave another contented sigh, wiggled her hips again and said, "Before, I never could have said this, but now, I believe that I love you just as much." She sealed her statement with a sensual kiss as she wiggled her hips once again.

Releasing her arms from around his neck, she leaned back so that she was floating on the surface with just her face in the air. She sighed and said, "This is the life. Time alone with my husband and not a care in the world. No more Trask."

Looking out through the window she said, "Just look at that view! I know it isn't like when you take me flying, but..."

Derailing her train of thought, a light suddenly went on in an office across from them. The lights were in the top floor offices in the building directly across the way. While she watched, three men entered the reception area and then moved through to the inner office. Lois noted that one of the men was tall and slim, wearing a business suit. In startled recognition, Lois asked, "Isn't that Congressman Ian Harrington?"

Her question drew Clark's attention to the office across the way and he zoomed in with his telescopic vision. He said, "I think you're right. What's he doing in that office?"

Looking at the second man, she decided that she didn't recognize him, but she noted that he was short and stocky, wearing black slacks and a black turtleneck. The third man was huge, wearing muscle pants and a t-shirt. Clark could see with his x-ray vision that he had a stiletto hanging handle down in a shoulder holster.

Lois was looking on in rapt attention and realized just what

Clark was doing and felt that she needed to level the playing field somewhat. Without looking away she asked, “Clark, could you get my bag? I have binoculars and a camera in it.”

Moving so fast that he barely made a ripple, he retrieved her bag for her. She grabbed her binoculars and camera. First she looked at what was unfolding with the binoculars and then said, “Keep an eye on them while I take some pictures.”

Neither of them got much sleep that night. Now that the fear of intimacy had been broken, Lois was virtually insatiable. They had taken some brief naps, in between sexual encounters. Early in the morning, Lois had been straddling his hips once more, and as she was climbing off, she said, “I think I want to go for a flight.”

“Oh, where do you want to go?”

She was kneeling naked on the bed next to him as she said, “I think I want to go to Brazzaville.”

He was incredulous as he questioned, “Brazzaville? Why there?”

With an arch look, Lois said, “I think it’s time that Suzanne and Collette learned that Coquinos is off the market.”

“What about Claude?”

She smiled and replied, “I heard through the grapevine that Derek fired Claude. Suzanne and Collette both filed harassment charges against him.”

“Do I sense a setup there?”

“Well, I did warn them about him and told them what he had done to me. They are my girlfriends, after all.”

“What happened to not leaving the country?”

“Well, since we will be going by Superman express we don’t have to go through customs, so even though I’ll carry my passport there won’t be any stamp. Who’s to know? As far as the Planet knows we’re here on our honeymoon and don’t want to be disturbed. When we show Perry what we have on Harrington, he won’t ask any more questions. He might even send us back here to use it as a crow’s nest for the investigation. He’ll never ask where we were.”

“Okay, Brazzaville it is. Let’s get dressed.”

Startled, Lois blurted out, “Now?”

With a smile he replied, “You forgot about the difference in time zones. If we leave now we’ll get there in the afternoon, local time.”

“Oh, that’s right! I forgot.” She bounced off the bed and went to the cabinet where her clothes were stored and pulled out an outfit to wear. As she did, she looked critically at what she had, and holding it up, said, “You know, I think I need to do one of two things. I either need to hem these things, or else buy a new wardrobe.” She looked down at her naked self and said, “You have convinced me that I don’t have anything to hide. That’s what I’ve been doing all of these years: hiding. After what happened, I had a poor self-image. You’ve cured me of that and I think you’d like to see my legs, even when we aren’t in bed.”

With a thoughtful expression, Clark said, “There’s this little boutique in Brazzaville that the twins told me about. It’s where they buy all of their clothes. If we leave now, maybe you and the twins could go shopping.”

Throwing herself into his arms, Lois was weeping as she blubbered, “You’d do that for me? You’re so sweet.” While she dressed, he spun into some clothes with his uniform underneath.

Once they were both changed they headed out. After they had exited the building, they ducked into an alleyway. A few seconds later a colorful streak split the air and headed south-east.

Chapter 23 — Epilogue

At 348 Hyperion Ave., after Herb stepped through his portal and disappeared, Lois turned to Clark and complained, “My, that was rude. He left us hanging. It would have been nice if he would have finished the story. We don’t know how they made out. We

don’t know if they had children. We don’t know if he had to face Nightfall, nothing!”

Clark chuckled and quipped, “Well, at least he told us that they wouldn’t have to deal with Luthor the way we did.”

Lois was very subdued as she replied, “Yeah, it still bothers me that I didn’t see him for what he really was and fell for his line. The only good thing that came out of that was the fact that I realized, before it was too late, that I really didn’t love him. I was in love with my bespectacled partner. I realized that while I was getting dressed and finally managed to admit it to myself. That gave me the courage to say ‘no’ at the altar, just before Perry and the police burst in.”

Clark was thoughtful as he mused, “I wonder if the other Clark found his Lois and had that problem to deal with. Hopefully not.” He paused for a second in thought before saying, with an impish grin, “I think we can figure out how they made out. We do it every day.”

Lois slapped his arm playfully and replied, “Not that way! You know what I mean. I meant did they have a happy marriage like ours?”

“Yeah, I wish Herb had dropped that little piece of information.”

Lois’s brain was constantly working and she commented, thoughtfully, “I just had a thought. You know it would be really convenient if we both spoke a foreign language the way they can. They are both fluent in French. They could communicate in a crowd, and unless they were in a French-speaking country, they could do it secretly. Maybe I should learn French. What do you think?”

“I could teach you. How about we start now. Je t’aime.”

Lois puzzled over this for a second and then asked, “Okay, what does that mean?”

“I love you.”

“I know you do, but what does that mean?”

“I just told you. I love you.”

Frustration in her tone, Lois said, “I know you love me. I do love hearing you say that to me, but what does ‘Je t’aime’ mean?”

Smiling, he replied, “I think you could be onto something. Communicating in a foreign language could have its advantages. I was telling you what ‘Je t’aime’ means. It means ‘I love you’ in French.”

Smiling, Lois stepped into his arms and started a kiss. When they broke the kiss, she said, “Je t’aime. They do say that French is the language of love. I am glad that it finally worked out for them.”

After she said that, Clark pulled her into a hug and said, “So am I. It didn’t look very promising at first. Actually, at first it looked very promising. It was only when the relationship started to develop that she got the cold feet.” Clark paused for a few seconds before he said, “At least they didn’t have to cope with Luthor. Honey, you know that if Herb had told us some of those things, he would have been giving us a peek at our own future and you know what he says.”

“Yeah, ‘Too much information, too soon is not good.’” Her tone became even more frustrated as she said, “I really hate it when he does that, even when he doesn’t do it outright. I wonder if we will ever meet this couple the way we met the other Clark, the one from that first alternate universe. The one who needed to find his Lois.”

“I don’t know, but with Herb on the case, you never can tell. He may find a situation in one of the universes that needs more than one superhero and he could come asking me to help. Actually, with all of the universe-hopping he does, he could recruit a small army of superheros if the need was there.”

“You’re not going anywhere without me, buster, especially if there would be other Lois Lanes there. And Lana; I saw how she was with the other Clark. I had enough of that when you went

away with Zara. If it hadn't been for Ching sneaking me aboard as one of your concubines, I might never have seen you again."

"Deal; if I go, you go. And speaking of going, I think we have a vacation to go on. We need to get started. We are already packed, so, next stop, Smallville."

He picked up the luggage in one hand, Lois leaped into his arms, and they took off on their much deserved, needed, and anticipated vacation. Before they got to their island they needed to break up a terrorist plot, but there was no way for them to know that, yet.

Herb was whistling a merry tune as he walked down the hall to his office. His door opened at his approach, and stepping inside, he said, "Lights."

Fixtures made to resemble gas lamps from the early twentieth century sprang to life flooding the space with a warm glow. As the door closed behind him, he removed his hat and coat and hung them on the coat tree which stood just inside the room.

As he started walking to his desk he reached up and undid his collar button, and after removing it, loosened his shirt collar. Changing direction, he moved to the sideboard and prepared a cup of tea, which he carried to the desk. He took a sip of tea and then placed the cup on his desk before he sat in his chair. As he sat the chair squeaked in protest and Herb smiled at the familiar sound.

Sitting back he looked up and said, "Computer?"

He heard back, "Working. File, a letter or a journal entry?"

"Personal log."

"Entry title?"

"Oh, call it 'Notes on visit to Lois and Clark in Prime'."

"File started."

"I have just had a most delightful visit with the Lois and Clark of Prime. They were the perfect audience for me when I related the story of Canadian Lois. They enjoyed the tale immensely, however, I had to cut it short. I delayed them in their departure for a vacation as it was. I didn't want to delay them any longer than I did for two reasons. First, they would be disrupting a terrorist plot to bomb a government building, preventing the loss of a significant number of lives, and second, that was the trip which resulted in Lois's first pregnancy." (See Borrowed Time — Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 2)

"If I had told them the next part of the story it could have caused them to ask some rather embarrassing questions."

"I still question the board's decision, but I have to bow to their wishes. They have decided to withhold the knowledge of the pendant from Lois until 2010, and as they are her descendants, who am I to question them. I can understand it even if I do not agree with it. The decision to wait was based upon the creation of Alpha 023 x Gamma 004 x Tau -120 wherein Lois's life was not extended by the exposure to the Kryptonian aura. In this way she did not have to suffer the anxiety of the 'what if?' that is normal in these circumstances."

"After this new Lois and Clark had dated and she realized that he really was committed to the marriage she lost her fears and it truly became a marriage and a partnership."

"As soon as I had determined their status I had returned to their universe and..."

Lois and Clark were at home. They were on the couch cuddling. Lois's low-cut blouse displayed quite a bit of cleavage and the upper slopes of her breasts, her right leg was hooked over his, and the slit in her skirt ran almost all the way to her hip and revealed a slender, shapely leg. They were watching a movie when there was a knock on the door. Clark hit the pause button, untangled himself from her, and standing, said, "I'll see who it is."

Answering the door he found a dapper little man on the stoop. "Can I help you?"

"Ah, yes, Mr. Kent. Yes, you can. May I come in?"

Clark x-rayed him, and seeing only a watch on a chain, a pen and pencil set in his breast pocket, and what appeared to be a jewelry box and a small electronic device in his pants pocket, he said, "Yes, you may."

Herb stepped in, and seeing Lois standing next to the couch, straightening her skirt and blouse, said, "Ah, good evening, my dear. I'm pleased to see you." He indicated the living room and turning to Clark asked, "May I?"

Clark nodded and said, "You seem to know us, but... who are you?"

When he and Clark had descended to the floor of the living room, Herb turned to Lois and said, "Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Herbert George Wells."

Lois had a thoughtful expression as she said, "I've heard that name somewhere before."

Herb replied, "Ah, well, I am something of an author. You may have read one or two of my books."

Clark was curious, "What title?"

With a slight cough to cover his embarrassment, Herb replied, "The uh, The Time Machine, War of the Worlds, To the Moon and Back, to name a few."

Lois was startled and blurted out, "The Time Machine? That was written by H. G. Wells. Wait a minute: you said your name was Herbert George Wells. Are you saying that you are H. G. Wells?"

"Indubitably."

Clark sputtered out, "But... but that's... that's impossible! H. G. Wells is dead."

"To quote a friend of mine, Sam Clemens, 'The rumors of my death are greatly exaggerated.' He gave a small chuckle at the humor before he continued, "Yes, as a matter of fact, I am dead, just not as yet."

Clark was confused, "Huh?"

"Let me put it this way. I am dead, dead and buried, but because of the vagaries of time travel that hasn't happened as yet. You see, I did not only write about time travel: I do travel in time."

Lois and Clark both looked at him like he had lost his mind. In a subtle move, Clark placed himself between Lois and the visitor. After a few seconds and yet another close appraisal, Clark invited Herb to have a seat. Herb sat in an easy chair across the coffee table from them as they sat side by side on the sofa.

After they were all seated, Herb continued, "I can see that you will need some convincing, not only that I am not insane, but that I am who I purport to be. Let me see; how to convince you? Perhaps I should tell you something of your past. Something that a casual researcher would not know."

Lois and Clark, feeling on safe ground, said, "Okay, tell us something only we would know."

"Right, yes, okay. How about this: you, Mr. Clark Kent, have a secret. The best kept secret in the world."

Clark and Lois both started to become apprehensive.

Herb continued, "There is something that no one, aside from you, your immediate family, and I know, and that is the fact that — how do you put it? Ah, yes — 'You are not from around here.' By around here, you are actually not speaking of a city; you are in fact speaking of the Earth."

Clark and Lois's first instinct was to deny it, but before they had the chance, Herb continued, "As I said, I am a time traveler. I have been to the future, your future, and I can assure you that you have a long and prosperous life. Both you and Lois, together, will have many adventures."

"I'm not sure about this. What exactly are you accusing me of?"

"Oh, my dear Clark, I'm not accusing you of anything. I am stating that you are, in very fact, Superman. You came here from the Planet Krypton in a small spaceship. The Kents found you in Schuster's field, removed you from the ship, adopted you, and

raised you as their only son.” Herb mused for a few seconds before he continued, “Your powers started to develop when you were approximately ten years old -”

Clark cut him off, “Okay, you’ve convinced me that you know who and what I am, but... time travel?”

Herb smiled and said, “I do have a lot to tell you.” Looking back and forth between Lois and Clark, he continued, “Yours is a special destiny, but I have begun to live by a motto of sorts. It goes like this: ‘too much information, too soon, is not good’. You will have to bear with me if it seems like I am not giving you all of the information which you desire. Suffice it to say that you have a special destiny here in this universe.”

Lois interrupted, “Universe? Why do you call it that?”

“Ah, the famous Lois Lane inquisitiveness. It manifests itself in every universe I have visited. Yes, I said universe. Let me ask you, do you believe in alternate realities, or dimensions?”

Clark replied, “I’ve read about such in science fiction. It sounded... unbelievable.”

“Oh, trust me, it is believable. You see, I am from what you could call an alternate dimension. There are many alternate dimensions, or as we have chosen to call them, alternate universes. In almost all of them there is a Clark Kent and a Lois Lane. I have interacted with many of them in my travels. It is my mission, as they say, to facilitate their union as a couple in each universe, if at all possible. I guess that’s a little hard to accept, but it is true nonetheless. I have been to your past. While there I witnessed you, Lois, as you waited for the ship to dock in Point Noir. In other universes, that event had been a death trap. In your case it was still a trap, but a very subtle one.”

Lois was shocked, “Trap? I wasn’t trapped, least of all in a death trap. The ship never docked. It was lost at sea in a storm.”

“Yes, that was the story you were told. Do you recall any storm coming ashore while you were there?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean anything. It could have come ashore farther up or down the coast.”

“In point of fact there was no storm. The ship stood off the coast for three days before coming in to dock. The reason for that was specifically so that you would not have the story. The shipper was warned to delay the delivery, just as you were given the tip about the shipment, and by the same person, I might add. The person that made those calls is named Tempus.”

“But why?”

“Simply to get you to travel out of the country and violate your agreement with the INS. His intent was that you should be deported so you couldn’t meet Clark. He didn’t count on the inefficiency of the bureaucracy involved, nor did he count on your resourcefulness.”

In a surprised tone, Lois blurted out, “He was trying to keep Clark and me apart?”

“Yes. You see, you and Clark are, as I said, a very special couple. In the future there will be a utopian society and it will be founded by you and your descendants. Imagine a society based on the foundational principles of Superman. I am sorry to say that the individual who did this is a citizen from that utopia. One who finds that society... tedious. He has attempted to disrupt the course of history in many universes in an attempt to destroy that utopia. Yours is just the latest we have found. The reason I did not interfere in your case as I have done in others was the fact that the trap was not so apparent.”

“What could you have done?”

“Oh, there are a number of things I could have done. I could have intercepted you as soon as you stepped off the plane and taken you back to the minute after you boarded the plane so that it would appear as though you had never left. I could have told you the true story right after you received the call from Tempus and told you about the trap, preventing your departure. Unfortunately his trap was far too subtle, and I didn’t catch on until it was far too

late, and I couldn’t risk the creation of yet another universe.”

“How would that have happened?”

“I’m afraid I am getting into much more detail that I had planned. It is sufficient that you are now married and you have foiled Tempus’s plan.” Reaching into a pocket, Herb pulled out a velvet-covered box. As he held it, he had a thoughtful expression. Finally making up his mind, he offered the box to Lois as he said, “Please accept this as a wedding gift.”

Lois took the box, and after looking at Clark for permission and receiving his nod, opened it. When she did, she gasped out, “Oooooo, it’s beautiful!”

In the box was a silver necklace with a pendant in the shape of Superman’s crest. It had blue star sapphires imbedded in the surface.

She said, “I cannot accept this. It ... it’s just too much.”

Herb held up a hand and said, “Please allow me to explain. That is a very special pendant. Most of the Lois Lanes are now wearing them as are the spouses of her married children.” He thought for a second before he continued, “While you were in Smallville you became aware of a glowing green crystalline rock. You never named it, but in other universes it was dubbed ‘Kryptonite.’ The green variety can negate your powers and possibly even kill you, but there are other forms of Kryptonite. Contained within that pendant are two very special forms of Kryptonite.”

At that word, Clark jumped back.

Herb quickly said, “It will not affect you, Clark. These are forms that only affect Earth human spouses of Kryptonian humans. Lois, you should wear or at least carry that pendant on your person at all times.”

“Why?”

“As I said, within the matrix of this pendant are two special forms of Kryptonite, a red and also a very rare blue star sapphire Kryptonite. There will come a time in the near future when you will thank me for giving you this gift. It will protect both of you when Clark is attacked with a laser.”

Clark smirked, “A laser can’t hurt me.”

Herb countered, “This one can. The rod used to focus the laser will be made from a form of red Kryptonite. This pendant will protect both of you and prevent any harm befalling you. I cannot tell you any more than that and in fact I may be telling you too much already.”

“When will this attack occur?”

“I’m sorry. I must resort to my motto, ‘too much information, too soon is not good.’ Suffice it to say that it will be in the not too distant future and you will know when it happens. Because of this pendant, you may be surprised at the outcome of the attack.”

Lois asked, “You say there are other couples... like... us. How many?”

Herb chuckled and replied, “You would be surprised at how many there are, and there are more being created all of the time. It is a cosmic phenomenon.”

“Are they all... together... like us? You know... married?”

“I am happy to say that in almost all cases they are, and happily. I think I need to tell you about yourselves.”

“Tell us about... us?”

“Yes, my dear. About you. You are a very special couple.”

Turning to Clark he asked, “Have you ever wondered just why you were so attracted to Lois as soon as you met her?”

“Well, yeah. It had never happened before. In the past, I did have a relationship with Lana, but it was nothing like this. With Lois, as soon as I saw her, I fell in love with her. It was the classic love at first sight.”

As the discussion had progressed, Lois and Clark had begun to relax. Lois had leaned back into him, and crossed her right leg over her left, displaying her leg.

Lois added, “I have to admit that I was attracted to Clark the

very first minute. I was afraid of relationships so I suppressed it. It was hard because I was so attracted to him. I was both happy and afraid when Perry teamed us up. I was so happy that I sent a note to my girlfriends in Brazzaville to let them know, but I was so scared that I tried, at least initially, to keep him at arm's length and assume the dominant role in the partnership."

"I was disappointed when she shied away."

"That attraction is what I need to explain. There are certain individuals that are simply meant to be together. They are what I call soul-mates. I have made the acquaintance of a number of Lois and Clark couples in the various universes and it is invariably the same. In one case, I used a device called a soul-tracker to go back into their past lives and we found that in each life, they were mated. In those worlds where they are mated, eventually a utopian society develops based upon the example that Superman and the Superman family present."

"Then we will have children! Will they be superbabies?"

With a chuckle at Lois's eagerness, Herb said, "Yes, the Kryptonian genes are dominant. You will have superbabies."

Lois was practically bouncing in her seat as she asked, "How many?" Lois actually surprised herself with this. Because of what had happened to her family after her father's actions, Lois had never wanted to get married, and if she did she wouldn't want to risk doing to her children what her parents had done to her and Lucy, so she had decided long ago that she would never have children. Now that she was married to Clark and realizing his commitment to the marriage she had undergone a total shift in her attitude. Now, more than anything, she wanted to share her body with her husband and have his babies. Babies that were from her body and with their shared DNA.

Herb smiled and said, "I think it is best if I don't tell you everything. Let's leave some things to be surprises, shall we?"

Lois thought about it and then started to get a serious look as she thought out loud, "How will I be able to cope with a superbaby?"

Herb calmed her fears when he replied, "At first they will be just like any other child. Like Clark, they will not start to develop their powers until their teen years. By then, I don't think you will have any problems."

Herb spent a pleasant evening with them, gathering information from them and giving some in return before he left.

Pulling a small device from his pocket, he started entering coordinates. As he did, he said, "Well, I must be toddling along. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to visit, occasionally, just to see how you are getting along. If you wouldn't mind."

With her hand over her pendant, feeling it with the palm of her hand, Lois spoke up, "That would be fine. We'd like to see you again. Maybe you can tell us about some of the adventures that other Supermen have had."

Herb hesitated and said, "One last thing before I go. In the not-too-distant future the Earth will be threatened by a giant asteroid. A word of advice: don't try to destroy it by flying directly into it. Be prepared. Have a space suit of some sort ready. When the time comes, push it out of its orbit. If you crash into it there will be dire consequences both for you and the Earth. In other universes Superman has crashed into it in an attempt to destroy it and he was injured. He had amnesia. Aside from that, some of the smaller fragments made landfall and caused significant destruction."

"Thanks for the warning, Herb. I'll be on the lookout."

"Oh, I need to ask: is there a Doctor Bernard Klein in your universe?"

"Yeah, Bernie Klein works at Star Labs. We interviewed him when we were looking for the invisible man."

"Excellent. Bernie Klein is a man of integrity in every universe. You can trust him. I'm sure he could help with the space

suit, among other things. He is a good friend to other Lois and Clark couples."

"Thanks, we'll work on developing that friendship."

As he hit the final combination, Herb said, "You are quite welcome. Well, ciao," and stepped through the portal that had popped into existence.

Once he had disappeared, Clark asked, "Do you want some ice cream?"

"Yeah; chocolate, chocolate chip. How did you know?"

"We've been married for a little over two months. I think I know some things about my wife by now. That was a lot to take in."

"I'll say. I think we need to arrange a meeting with Doctor Klein tomorrow. Let's not wait until the last minute."

"I agree. We need to start preparing for that asteroid."

"I don't want my husband forgetting his wife."

"I don't want to forget my wife any more than she wants me to forget her. Now that we are married, I want it to last a long time and I want to remember every minute."

As Clark headed for the kitchen to get the ice cream, Lois started to smile as she muttered, just loud enough that Clark could hear her with his super-hearing, "Superbabies. I'm gonna have superbabies."

THE END