

The Wonder of Love

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Rated: PG-13 (for violence and sexual content)

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Summary: On their fifth anniversary, Clark and Lois find their marriage under attack from both without and within. External events put doubts in Lois' mind about whether she should really be Superman's wife. And another woman is trying to force a wedge between them — but not just with her feminine wiles.

Let me issue a WHAM warning right now. This is NOT a Lois deathfic or a Clark deathfic, but it's rated PG-13 for both sexuality and graphic violence. If you don't like seeing Lois Lane badly hurt, please stop now. And if you don't like seeing Superman push the envelope of acceptable Superman behavior, please stop now.

If you want to take a chance on this story, however, I will tell you that Lois survives this tale. I will also tell you that Lois and Clark as a couple survive the narrative. But that's all I promise. So if you have the Amazonian strength to continue, I invite you to do so — with the following words of warning (cribbed from Dante and slightly mangled) before your eyes.

“Abandon (nearly) all hope, all who enter here.”

Prologue

I wipe the blood from in front of my good eye and look at my opponent. She still looks magnificent and beautiful despite being so beat up. On the best day of my life, I didn't look as stunning as she does right now, and that's after I've done my dead level best to clean her clock.

She's almost twenty feet away and moving toward me again. Can't get away from her. Can't move fast enough. Can't run, can't even crawl away. Have to face her one more time.

The tall brunette's left arm is hanging at a strange angle below her elbow. Must be where I broke it. I think that surprised her.

She's limping badly as she edges closer. Why is she limping? Oh, yeah, I remember now, I tore the ligaments in her right knee with a really good side kick, maybe even cracked the tibia in that leg. Broke her nose with an elbow strike, too, and bit a couple of holes through one earlobe. Grabbed that big mane of hair and put a knee into her cheek, may have broken it. I got one real good kick in on her crotch and another on the inside of her upper thigh. Her left side below her rib cage is a nasty reddish hue. I can't see the bruises on her back, but I know I put some there. I think I bruised a kidney or two. And both of her eyes are blackened and bruised.

She's about ready to drop dead and she still looks better than I ever did. Crap.

Of course, I'm not much better off, assuming I am better off, which I'm not too sure of at the moment. My right shoulder feels dislocated, but it doesn't matter because I'm

sure my right hand is broken. I'm pretty sure my left ankle is broken, too. At least two ribs low on my left side are busted and I've lost three or four teeth. My right eye is swollen shut and I can't breathe through my nose. The pain of the air rushing past my broken teeth is setting off electric air-raid sirens in my head every time I inhale.

On top of that, I've got friction burns all over from falling and sliding and skidding on the burning sand. Fighting naked on a beach under a broiling hot sun is no fun at all, even if all those other women are watching and cheering us on. Are they cheering for her or for me? Or are they just hoping for more blood? I can't tell what they're saying, and it bugs me.

Of course, fighting to the death is the real bummer. I'm supposed to kill her, but I don't remember why. I don't want to kill her — at least, I don't think I do. Surely I'd recall something like that. Maybe I have a concussion along with all my other little boo-boos.

I don't remember a lot right now, but I know I surprised her when I started hitting her at will. She's strong, way stronger than me, and she hits like a pile driver with an attitude problem, but she has very little real fighting skill. I doubt if she knows anything about blocking or deflecting. She hasn't done a very good job of doing that, at least not against me.

Of course, I haven't blocked all of her blows, either. If I had, I wouldn't be in the shape I'm in.

What was I talking about? Oh, yeah, the fight.

I guess I must have a concussion, a pretty serious one, too. Can't remember where I am. Not sure how I got here. But I know this woman wants to kill me, even though I don't remember why. Has something to do with — with a man. But what man? Did I do something to him? Or to her? Who pooped on her oatmeal anyway?

“Ish ta — “ She stops and spits out a mouthful of bright red blood and almost falls over. Then she straightens and stands tall, panting with the effort. “It's time for one of us to die now, Lois,” she growls. “May Hera gar — grant that it be — be you.”

Her voice used to be almost musical. I don't know why I remember that, except maybe because it doesn't sound musical now. It's wet and gruff and snarly and hard to understand. But I grasp her meaning well enough.

I try to answer, but my mouth won't form the words. I'm not even sure what to say to her. I wonder what Miss Manners has to say about a situation like this?

Huh. Thinking of Miss Manners at a time like this. That's funny.

I kind of gargle out a laugh and she stops for a moment. Her eyes change, and for the first time I can tell that she's not sure she can beat me. Even if I don't survive this fight, that look on her face is a victory for me.

Given the choice, though, I'd rather live through the fight.

She's moving closer again. Coming in for the killing blow. I don't want to die. I don't even remember why she wants to kill me. But I know that if I don't kill her, she'll kill me. I don't have a choice. Or maybe I already made my choice and can't remember making it. Either way, I have to keep going.

I can see the red liquid welling out of her where I raked my nails across her breasts and cut her pretty deep. I remember that she really didn't like that. She's bleeding from her nose and a cut on her scalp along with that bunch of scratches on her chest and belly, too, but she's not losing enough blood to make her stop. And I don't know if I can still fight her.

But I have to try. Have to. Don't want — don't — what's his name? Right, I got it. Don't want Clark to find out I quit on this fight. Want to make him proud of me. Want him to remember me as a fighter, not a quitter.

Master Whatsisname wouldn't want me to quit, either, but I'm not real worried about his opinion of me right now.

I grab my useless right arm with my left to hold it still as I roll away from her. I manage to ignore the hot shooting pain in my ankle and my shoulder as I slowly stand up. I feel clumsy as a newborn fawn. And I'm not much stronger, either. My vision keeps tilting, too. Can't have that. Could be fatal.

Have to focus. Have to focus. Ignore the pain. There is no pain. Focus.

I twist my right foot into the sand to brace myself. She hobbles closer and draws back her one good fist for a final blow. I lift my left arm to block it and try to prepare a counter-punch with that same arm. Aim for her eye again. It's nice and tender and swollen, ought to bleed pretty good. Knock her off balance, or whack her in the side of her throat if I can't reach her eye. Knock her down, put her on her back on the sand and — and —

And — and I don't know what comes next. I just know that she's going to kill me if I don't fight back.

She's shuffling around me now, angling for my right side, the side where my eye is swollen shut and I can't see her, the side I can't defend. If she gets over there I'll never block her punch. Have to turn to face her, keep moving, don't fall, keep her in front of me so I can —

Here it comes —

Chapter One

Lois opened her eyes and smiled. She shifted in the rickety bed and giggled as it creaked beneath her. If not for Clark's powers, they might have broken it the night before.

She lifted her head and looked around for her husband, then spotted him sitting on the porch of the beach house, wearing his baggy swim trunks and gazing out at the gentle surf. She rolled over and stood up, intending to attack him there in her natural state of undress — which he'd certainly appreciated the night before — but nature demanded attention to certain tasks, so she surrendered to the inevitable and padded to the tiny bathroom.

As she walked back into the bedroom, a tray of fresh fruit and hot pastry appeared before her. "From the town?" she asked.

He took a long moment to appreciate her undraped body, then sighed and nodded. "Fresh from the tree, vine, or oven, as the case may be."

She took the tray and wiggled slowly toward the bed without looking back at him. She heard his breath catch as she sat on the ragged comforter with the tray on her lap, one leg folded under her, almost facing him but still not looking at him. "My, my, what would Perry say if he saw us right

now, enjoying the pleasures of southern France instead of camping in the Adirondacks where we told him we were going?"

"Uh — Perry — what?"

"Would he fuss at us for 'imposing' on Superman or just wink and tell us that he isn't editor-in-chief because he can yodel?"

He let out a long, slow breath and muttered, "Hah?"

She smiled at him. "I said, isn't this better than the woods in northern New Troy?"

He didn't answer right away. She suppressed a giggle by biting into a fresh pear and allowing the juice to flow down her chin onto her bare chest. His eyes got even wider and his jaw slackened.

Teasing Clark was almost as much fun as making love to Clark.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him shake his head as if coming out of a trance. "Lois, if you don't stop that, we'll never get to our morning swim."

She put the pear back on the tray and set the tray down on the floor beside the bed. She sat up, slowly pulled her hair back with both hands, and said, "Morning swims are overrated, don't you think?"

Judging by the level of enthusiasm he showed in joining her on the bed — and the fact that he was beside her before his trunks hit the floor — he must have agreed.

She lay in his arms and listened to the rhythm of his heart as he slept. It sounded different from the other hearts she'd listened to, way back when her father was pushing her to follow him into medicine. It was somehow more powerful, more confident, more intense than any other she'd ever heard. It was as if his heart contained all his heroic qualities and could barely restrain them, even in slumber.

She smiled. They'd managed an entire week away from the paper for their fifth anniversary, and when Clark had suggested spending it together on a private Mediterranean beach in southern France, she'd all but jumped for joy. They'd agreed to give each other their presents upon returning home, and it had given her time to find the carved wooden Eskimo totem she'd decided to get for him. It would fit well with the rest of his collection of exotic tribal art.

That took care of the traditional fifth anniversary gift, something of wood. He'd gotten her input on his gift of silverware, the more modern fifth-year gift. She loved both the pattern and the number of servings. It was large enough to entertain guests without taking up huge amounts of drawer space in the kitchen.

She listened to the tiny gurgling sounds coming from her own torso and smiled again. Daddy would have told her that everyone made those sounds at some time and they meant little.

But the thought of her father led to the memory of the most recent phone call from her mother. She and Daddy had split up again, and somehow this time it felt final. Daddy had gone off to New Guinea to research some new species of plant which might be useful in treating Alzheimer's and other causes of dementia in older people. Mother wasn't

drinking at all, which oddly contributed to Lois' depression, because none of them could blame this split on Ellen's alcoholism. She'd gone back to teaching at the New Troy Medical College.

And Lucy's last letter had revealed that she and Brad were getting a divorce. Lucy claimed that Brad was cheating on her. Lucy had written that Brad claimed that Lucy didn't trust him and accused him of infidelity every chance she got and with no provocation or justification. Lois didn't know who was telling the truth or if the truth was somewhere in the middle, but the upshot was that Lucy was about to be divorced for the second time.

At least this time Lucy she had a profession to fall back on. Even if accounting wasn't a very sexy profession, at least it paid regularly. And she was guaranteed extra work every spring when tax time came around, even if she was alone at night.

It appeared that Lois was the only one of the Lane family to have a solid relationship with a spouse.

To get her thoughts to a better place, she wondered what Clark might get her for her birthday. She was —

She suddenly realized that her next birthday would be her thirty-fifth.

Thirty-five! It didn't seem real. She couldn't be that old! Not yet!

A fragment of memory floated to the surface of her mind, from about the time she'd first met Clark. Lucy had informed her that she didn't have dates, she had interviews, and that she wasn't getting any younger. Lois had insisted that she was still young, and Lucy had responded with, "Twenty-six today, thirty-six tomorrow!"

That sobering tomorrow wasn't all that far off now. Where had the years gone?

She shifted and pulled her arm from under Clark's head. He murmured something unintelligible and shifted to lie flat on his back, but he didn't wake up.

Lois looked at her husband, admiring the flat tautness of his abdomen, the bulge of his chest, the smooth and supple lines of his arms, the long muscular legs — he was a beautiful man. Even his feet were just about perfect. The only mark on him that shouldn't have been there was a small scar on the front of his right shoulder where a desperate criminal had stabbed him with a green Kryptonite shard a year before. Unlike other similar injuries, this one didn't quite heal completely. Dr. Klein insisted that there was nothing left of the shard, that Superman didn't carry the seeds of his own destruction under his skin, but that didn't erase the scar.

And he'd been stabbed because he'd had to rescue her. Again.

Suddenly she had to get out of the house. She had to go somewhere, do something, anything, and she had to be alone to do it. She needed to be alone with her thoughts, and she couldn't risk waking him by getting dressed. So she crept to the open door, cat-footed onto the patio, grabbed the beach towel Clark had left there when she'd enticed him inside earlier, and raced to the edge of the water.

The warm sea water relaxed her and opened her mind. As she floated a few yards offshore, she reflected on how

wonderful her life was, and she considered what her life might be like if Clark weren't in it.

Who was she kidding? If not for Clark — and Superman — she'd be dead a dozen times over by now. If Clark hadn't come to the Daily Planet when he had, she wouldn't be here. There wouldn't be any shared Kerths, the Merriwether they'd won as a team wouldn't be sitting in their trophy case, and she wouldn't have been nominated for two Pulitzers. She literally could not have lived without him.

What about Clark? Could he live without her?

The cold, hard answer was — yes, he could.

He probably would still have become an excellent reporter without her prodding and teaching him. He might even have published several books by now, not just the one which was a compilation of his solo articles. As Superman, he could save more people and protect more property all over the world if he weren't spending so much time with her. She couldn't think of anything material that she contributed to Clark Kent or to Superman.

All things considered, it might have been better if they hadn't fallen in love and gotten married.

She shook her head and dove to the bottom, looking around at the small creatures whose world she was invading. The smart ones scattered immediately. A few remained until she swam too close, and before her air ran out she was by herself in that little patch of water.

She stopped and floated in place. She was alone in the sea, skinny dipping under water, and unless Clark just happened to look exactly where she was in that vast body of water, even he couldn't see her. It was as if she were completely alone in the universe.

The prospect wasn't as terrifying as she might have expected it to be.

Then her lungs demanded a refill. She kicked up to the surface and flipped her hair back as she popped up into the light. She inhaled deeply and slid back into the water, but the added air gave her a positive buoyancy and she drifted up again.

This time only her head broke the surface. She looked to the shore to locate her towel and saw Clark sitting on it. The other beach towel was wrapped around his waist. He waved and smiled. "Hey!" he called. "You should have nudged me. I love swimming with you."

She grinned a little. "I'm about ready to come out now anyway. Want to bring me my towel?"

His smile turned mischievous. "No, I don't. You come and get it."

"What? Clark, I'm kind of naked here! Please bring me my towel."

"I'm wearing your towel."

She wiggled closer to shore until she felt the slope of the beach brush her feet. "Then bring me your towel."

"Nope."

"Come on! This is a little public, don't you think?"

"You weren't worried about that a couple of days ago."

"Someone might see us!"

He made a show of looking both ways up and down the beach. "I don't see anyone else around. And you know I'd see them if they were there."

"Fine! Don't say I didn't warn you."

She paddled in until she could stand upright without slipping, then slowly walked out of the low waves until she stood in front of him, dripping wet and erect in all her feminine glory. “May I have my towel now?”

His grin had slipped and his eyes were partly glazed over. “Uh — oh, yeah. Sure, no problem.”

He stood and bent down to pick up the towel from the sand, and as he handed it to her she reached out and snatched away the towel he’d been wearing. “Gotcha!” she called, then began running along the waterline trailing one towel in each hand in the air above her head.

As she suspected, Clark wasn’t wearing his swimsuit either. She took advantage of his shock to get a few strides away, but he caught her almost immediately. He picked her up in his arms, spun her around, and kissed her.

She returned the kiss and dropped the towels. As soon as they hit the sand, however, he turned and ran into the water. “Clark!” she cried, and then they were both underwater.

She slipped away with a twist and a wiggle. Her head broke the surface just before his did. “You rat! I was just about to dry off!”

“Are you treading water?” he asked.

She squealed a laugh and splashed him in the face. “Yes! How about you?”

He swam closer and wrapped his arms around her. “I am now.”

She kissed him deeply. “You sure there’s no one around?”

“Positive.”

She put her lips beside his ear and whispered, “Then let’s take advantage of those towels on the shore.”

Their vacation time was up on Sunday, and this was late Friday afternoon in France. It was almost time to get back to reality. Lois lifted herself onto one elbow and smiled down at her husband, the sated satyr. “You know we have to go home soon, don’t you?”

He didn’t open his eyes. “Naw, let’s just stay here. We can e-mail travel stories from anywhere in the world.”

She giggled. “We’d just be sending in the same story over and over again. ‘The scenery is beautiful, the food is delicious, and the sex is great.’ The editors would be bored.”

He snorted and reached for her. “Yeah, but we wouldn’t.”

She popped him on the forehead with two knuckles. “Come on, Casanova, let’s get dressed and go into town for an early dinner. I’m hungry.”

He faked a pout. “It’s not my fault you didn’t eat breakfast.”

“Oh, really? Then who was that red-hot lover I moaned at all morning, the guy who kept me away from that tray?”

“Well, okay, if you put it that way, I confess. It was totally and completely my fault.”

She rolled to a sitting position with her arms wrapped around her knees. “Let’s go to town and get something to eat. I’m in the mood for some protein.”

He sat up beside her, put his hand on her far hip, and kissed her near shoulder. “Do you want to walk, get a cab, or float?”

She looked around and brushed her fingers through her hair. “Walk, I think. It’ll give me a chance to look around. Maybe we’ll see someone we know.”

“Not likely, hon. But I’m up for a walk with you. Are we talking shirt and pants or swimsuit and cover?”

She stood and wrapped her towel around her waist. “Shirts and pants and a wide-brimmed hat for me. I don’t need any more sun for a while. Unlike you, I can get burned, remember?”

He smiled. “Oh, the advantages of having a solar-powered metabolism.”

“Don’t remind me. Besides, I’d like to do a little shopping. We haven’t gotten any gifts for anyone yet, and we’re running out of time.”

“In that case, my lady love, I will shop with you until you drop.”

She poked him in the chest. “If I drop it, you’ll have to pay for it.”

The walk to town was fun, the dinner was nice, the shopping was pleasing to both buyer and seller, and fortunately the walk back to their secluded cottage was slightly downhill. When they entered the bedroom again, Clark took her in his arms and held her close.

For a long moment, she savored his manly scent, the feel of his arms around her shoulders, and the pressure of his body against hers. Then she leaned back and said, “I’m a bit tired tonight, darling. I need to get some quality sleep or I’ll be out cold when we fly back tomorrow evening.”

He smiled and nodded. “I understand. I guess I’m just too much man for you.”

She laughed. “Oh, really? Who was the first one to ask for a rest on our first anniversary?”

His brows twisted in mock severity. “Me. But that was because I was already worn out from fighting a multi-state forest fire.”

She slapped him on the chest. “Excuses, excuses! Now, my loving husband, please let me get some sleep tonight. We can pack in the morning if you want to.”

He looked around the room. “There’s not that much to pack, Lois, just our swim gear and two changes of clothes. And it’s not like we have a plane to catch.”

She slipped his embrace and headed to the bathroom. “Be prepared, that’s my motto.”

“Since when?”

Since I started feeling older, she thought, but she said, “Since I decided it was. I’m hitting the pillows as soon as I get my teeth brushed.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you under the sheet. And with just a good-night kiss, I promise.”

Lois fell asleep right away but didn’t stay asleep. The liquids she’d consumed with dinner awoke her just after midnight, and when she came back from the bathroom she felt wide awake. She knew the feeling wouldn’t last, but she knew that sleep would elude her for the moment.

She looked over at Clark and shook her head slightly. The man could fall asleep at a moment’s notice. Of course, since he spent so much time being Superman and her husband and an award-winning investigative journalist, he

was usually running on less sleep than even he needed.

She watched him breathe under the moonlight and it nearly took her breath away. She loved him so much that sometimes she almost couldn't stand it. He wasn't perfect, but his faults were few, and she easily forgave him every one without a conscious thought. The best part was that this incredible, immensely powerful, super-man loved her.

And she had no idea why that might be.

She hadn't understood why he'd waited patiently for two years as he undermined the fortress around her heart. She hadn't understood why he'd stayed around when she'd refused his first proposal. She hadn't understood when he'd stayed with her through the amnesia/clone/Luthor disaster. It wasn't as if she were his only choice for a companion.

It still baffled and amazed and stunned her that he thought her worthy of his love.

There were thousands — probably hundreds of thousands — of women of all ages from all over the world who were willing to drop everything in their lives to dedicate themselves to satisfying his every possible desire. The Metropolis post office still delivered every letter written to Superman to the Foundation, and despite Superman's multiple declarations that he neither required nor desired a romantic relationship with any woman, the letters still came.

Some came with pictures. And some of the pictures left nothing to the imagination.

He'd shared a few of the less lewd ones with her when they were first married, hoping to amuse her, but soon discovered that she wasn't pleased with the implicit competition. He'd never meant it that way, of course, but after that he destroyed the pictures as soon as he dropped them out of the envelopes. Not for a moment did she believe that he was savoring the views.

Yet Lois still knew that he saw them. And she couldn't hope to compete with some of those women.

It wasn't healthy to think along those lines, she knew, but she couldn't help it. She was getting older. He didn't seem to be. And despite having all the faith in the world in the Utopia their descendants were supposed to build — the one that H. G. Wells had claimed they would inspire — they hadn't conceived a child.

No. That wasn't right. Lois hadn't conceived a child.

And her biological clock was not just ticking, it was spinning like a windmill and buzzing like a nest of angry hornets.

She knew that Clark would tell her that it didn't matter to him. He'd take her in his arms and assure her that he'd married because he loved her, not because of any children she might or might not give him. But tonight, at that very moment, all of that made no difference to her. She knew, without anyone having to tell her, that she'd let him down, that she was holding him back, that she was the anchor keeping him from doing and being more than he already was.

She quietly turned on her side facing away from him and silently wept.

Chapter Two

Clark held the elevator door open for Lois as they stepped onto the news floor. The digital clock on the far

wall told him that they were almost half an hour early. Some people, he knew, hated to go back to work after a vacation, but for both himself and his wife that was untrue. They both found fulfillment in the work they did, whether they wrote together or separately.

He smiled as he looked out over the already bustling room. It was filled with people, some who were tapping on keyboards, several who were talking on phones and scribbling notes, a few who were discussing various news stories, a trio of young men talking about the college football games the previous weekend, and even a couple flirting with each other near the vending machines. It was barely controlled chaos, a roiling mass of humanity and information and secrets being uncovered and wrongs being righted. He loved it almost as much as his wife did.

He hoped that the cloud which had followed her back from France would disappear in the flurry of work he knew they'd have as soon as they checked in.

A harried Jimmy Olsen trotted past with a folder of photos in one hand and a mockup of the front page in the other. "Hey, guys, great to see you back! Good vacation, Lois?"

"Yes, we had —"

"You have a couple of messages from Master Whoozits, your martial arts instructor. I think he wants you to fight in some tournament next weekend."

"Thanks, I'll call Master Chou as soon as —"

"You see Perry yet, CK?"

"No, not —"

"Just smile and let him rant, okay? Don't take it personally when he bites your heads off."

Clark looked at his wife as Jimmy ran off. Her expression was as blank as his. Whatever Perry was upset about, neither of them had a clue about it.

Lois recovered first. "If Perry wants to see us that badly —"

"Then let's drop in on him now and defuse the explosion."

They exchanged smiles and dropped their coats at their respective desks, then snagged pencils and notepads from various drawers. Their hands met on Perry's doorknob.

Clark opened the door and let Lois precede him. She seemed eager to work on whatever their boss had for them. Maybe all she'd needed was to get back on the job.

Perry was standing and looking out the window, his desk phone in his ear. "No! They're not back yet! Yes, as soon as I see them. Of course we'll get Superman's reaction. Yes. Absolutely. You bet. No, not today, but how about tomorrow at Callard's? Good! I'll see you at home tonight. Love you, Alice."

He turned and jumped when he saw his visitors. "Dadgummit, kids, don't do that to me! I'm too old for you to sneak up on me like that."

Lois pressed her lips in a line, suppressing the laugh Clark knew was there, so he took the lead. "I understand you want to talk to us, Perry."

"Yeah. Sit down, you two. We need some info on this flying woman, so I want the two of you to try to track her down. See if you can — what is it, Lois?"

"We've been out of touch for a week, Chief. What flying

woman?”

Perry’s jaw dropped for a moment. “What? You mean you — you haven’t read a paper or listened to the radio since you left?”

Clark shook his head. “We wanted to get away from everything.”

Perry guffawed. “If you haven’t heard about the flying woman, you sure did that. Let me bring you up to speed.”

He pulled out a copy of the Daily Planet and handed it to them. “This is last Tuesday morning’s front page. Notice anything odd about the picture above the fold?”

Clark looked and saw a woman with long curly dark hair, wearing something akin to an American flag design on her swimsuit-like outfit. It was a getup which left her shoulders, arms, and legs bare, down to what looked like metal bracelets on her wrists, and red boots with white trim. She also wore a gold-colored tiara and carried a coiled rope or whip on her right hip.

The most amazing part, however, was that she seemed to be hovering over the camera.

She was smiling brightly and almost saluting. The background showed an angled view of Star Labs, the front of which was teeming with police and private security officers.

Clark looked at the picture credit. Of course James Olsen had gotten the shot.

Clark looked up. “Is this the only picture of her?”

Perry shook his head. “Whatever else this gal is, she sure ain’t camera-shy. Olsen’s got about twenty very good shots of her and maybe sixty where she’s blurred from moving too fast. And every other news outlet in town has good shots of her.”

Lois touched the photo showing the woman’s blue shorts. “Is she actually doing anything constructive or is she just flashing her assets all over town?” she asked.

Perry grinned for a moment. “She’s doing the same kinds of things Superman did when he first showed up, catching petty thieves and burglars and helping out at car wrecks and other stuff like that. She’s about as strong as Superman, too, and she can fly about as fast, we think.” He gave them a knowing look. “They haven’t met, as far as we know.”

Lois nodded. “And you want us to get the story behind this Superwoman?”

“You got it. ‘Cept she calls herself Wonder Woman. That symbol on her chest is supposed to be a stylized ‘WW’ mixed with an eagle. Claims to be an Amazon from some island somewhere, a society of warrior women. You’ll want to get some background on that from her if you can.”

She smirked. “That ought to be right up Clark’s alley.”

“Thanks, Lois,” he grumbled. “I appreciate your support.”

“Oh, one more thing,” Perry added. “That rope she carries has some special properties. If she drops it around someone, that person tells the truth to any question she asks. Got a suspect to confess to attempted rape a couple of days ago, and if the boys in blue hadn’t already been there I don’t know if the man would have ended up in jail or the morgue.”

Clark’s eyes widened. “I take it she’s not gentle with the

criminals she catches.”

Perry grunted and shifted in his chair. “Don’t really know. According to our reporter on the scene — it was Eduardo, by the way, make sure you talk to him — she was shocked that any man would try to rape any woman. Seems it doesn’t happen where she comes from.”

Lois snorted. “If she’s a representative sample of her people, then I’m not surprised. Is that the only report of her getting tough with the perps?”

“So far, yes.” He put his hands on his hips and glowered at the reporters. “Okay, you two. You have anything you have to take care of before you hit the ground running on this?” Both Kents shook their heads in the negative. “Then this is your main assignment. Go find her. Get all the details you can about her. Talk to her, get her to open up to you. And then bring the story back here.”

Lois smiled slightly. “Is that all?”

“What do you mean, ‘is that all?’ Don’t you think that’s more than enough?”

The corners of Clark’s mouth lifted slightly. “I think Lois wants to know what you want us to do after lunch, Perry.”

“Very funny. Now get to work.” They all stood, and as Clark and Lois moved toward the door, Perry asked, “Did you two have a good time on your vacation?”

The reporters shared a smile, then nodded to their boss in unison. “We sure did, Perry,” Clark said.

“So upstate New Troy was good to you?”

He saw the twinkle in the editor’s eyes and smiled in return. “It was a super time for us, Chief.”

Perry nodded sagely, and Clark knew he’d gotten the subtle message. Then Perry glowered at him. “Good. Hope the two of you got all of it out of your systems, because we have a paper to publish!”

Clark opened the door for Lois to exit, then he paused in the open doorway. “Was that Alice you were talking to when we came in, Chief?”

Perry nodded. He didn’t smile, but his face softened ever so slightly. “Yep. Bringing her on board with the paper’s legal staff was a stroke of genius. We’re getting along a lot better now than we were two years ago.” His mouth twitched on one side. “A lot better.” Then his standard-issue frown reasserted itself. “What are you waiting for? Get together with Lois and get me that story!”

“Yes, Chief, right away.”

Clark stopped at Lois’ desk, but she was already on the phone to Master Chou. “Yes, sir, I got your message. This coming Saturday? Oh, the next one. Yes, I think I can make that. Really? Thank you! It is truly an honor, sir. Oh, no, I’m nowhere near ready for the Dragon Heart bracelets. No, I think one superhero in Metropolis is plenty. Yes, we’ve heard. In fact, she’s our next assignment. Yes, of course. I will be in class tomorrow night. Thank you for your confidence in me. Good-bye.”

She slid the handset into its cradle. “I take it you heard all that?”

“Enough, I think. Is this an exhibition tournament or a combat tournament?”

“Exhibition with some demonstration combat included. He wants me to be in the top combat tier alongside his

granddaughter.”

He nodded. “Sounds like you accepted.”

“It’s a terrific honor, Clark! Besides, Lin and I have some pretty fierce routines we’ve been working on. They look like real combat, and if one of us makes a mistake the other one can get hit pretty hard.”

He frowned. “Is that why you’ve been coming home with bruises on your arms and legs lately?”

“It is. And don’t worry, she doesn’t use the Dragon Heart bracelets when she and I are sparring.”

He sighed. “That’s good. I’m not sure you’d survive that fight.”

She frowned back at him. “Come on, Clark! I’m testing next month for my fifth level black belt in Yi Chi. A few more years and maybe I’ll give up this rat race and go into business with Lin. She’s just about completely taken over for her grandfather now, and she’s told me several times that she enjoys working with me. She thinks I’d be a great teacher.”

He paused. Maybe this was part of that cloud he hoped she’d lose. Maybe she was feeling vulnerable or frustrated. And maybe she was beginning to feel like she wasn’t doing anyone any good no matter how many bad guys she put behind bars. After all, neither of them was getting any younger, and she didn’t have a Kryptonian physiology to help her out.

And it wasn’t completely out of the question for Lois to have thoughts about her future which didn’t involve doing what she was doing at the moment. She couldn’t be an investigator forever — no one could, given the physical demands and real danger inherent in the job — so maybe becoming a martial arts instructor would be a good change for her. Maybe she could do that and write at the same time. It might be a safer occupation than the one she performed today.

But that was a topic for another time. “I assume you’ll want me cheering you on from the sidelines?”

A pixie smile grew on her face. “As long as you don’t try to rescue me, yes.” Then her eyebrows rose. “Speaking of rescues, I think that should be our main focus for finding Wonder Woman. And it would help, I think, if Superman didn’t show up at every fender bender in the city for a while.”

He nodded. “It would be something of a coincidence if Superman were out of the city at the same time we were, and if he returned the same day we did.”

“So maybe we won’t see him for a few days?”

“As long as there are no emergencies Wonder Woman can’t handle, no.”

For the next three days, Clark and Lois read every word written about this Wonder Woman, reviewed every second of video footage showing her, pored over all of the police reports mentioning her, talked to twenty-nine different eye witnesses, covered four more appearances of the new super-heroine — without speaking directly to her, unfortunately — and they still had no real handle on what she was doing here. They might as well have walked out on their balcony and shouted for her to appear for all the progress they’d made.

On Thursday morning, just before ten o’clock, a dejected Lois walked over to Clark’s desk and plopped herself down on the edge. He gave her his best woeful puppy-dog look and pleaded, “Tell me you have something.”

She shook her head. “Nope. I hope you have something to give to Perry, because I sure don’t have anything worth printing.”

He leaned back and steepled his fingers under his chin. “Maybe we’re going about this the wrong way.”

“What other way is there?”

“Maybe — maybe she’s here for a specific purpose. Superman’s stated purpose was to help, and to fight for truth and justice. I haven’t found anything like that in any of her quotes.”

“Stated purpose?” Lois stared at him for a moment, then her eyebrows rose. “Wait a minute!” She lunged to her desk and began ripping through her notes until she found what she wanted. “Aha!”

Clark looked over her shoulder. “What are you ‘aha-ing’ about?”

“Her second day, the day she helped out at that truck wreck. One of the talking heads on the scene asked her if she’d met Superman yet.” Lois pointed at the pad. “Look at what she said.”

“No, I have not,” Clark read aloud, “but I look forward to making his acquaintance very soon. In fact, I am surprised and mildly disappointed that I have not already met him.” He looked at his wife. “That’s it? That’s the big ‘aha’ moment? Isn’t that kind of thin?”

“Yes, but there’s nothing else to point to her reason for being here in Metropolis! We already have a superhero, so why come here? The crime rate in Gotham City is much higher, and with all those costumed crazies pulling all kinds of insane stunts, she’d be as busy as she ever wanted to be. Even Batman can’t keep up with the demand.”

He frowned in thought. “That’s logical, but — “

“I know, I know, it’s thin, but it’s all we have right now!”

“But we can’t take this to Perry! He’d laugh and end up telling an Elvis story about some songwriter who brought a song to the King with only half a verse and part of a chorus.”

“Don’t be silly, he’s already used that one on me. Now look,” she bulled forward, “Superman hasn’t met up with this Wonder Woman yet, has he?”

Clark frowned as if he didn’t like the direction of her thoughts. “No, but — “

“Then why can’t he just casually fly a patrol some time, like maybe this afternoon, and see if she decides to introduce herself?”

Lois waited for him to either agree or to suggest a better plan, but there wasn’t a better one and she knew it. They needed to talk to this woman, and it seemed as if Superman was their only leverage.

Finally he nodded. “I still think it’s awfully thin, but I also agree that it’s our best shot. I’ll see if I can find Superman after lunch and ask him to do a patrol over the city.”

“I suggest that you ask him to focus on the area over

Suicide Slum,” added a third voice from behind Clark. “There seems to be an over-abundance of the criminal element there.”

Clark and Lois turned to look at the newcomer, who added, “Of course, any city with an area named Suicide Slum on the city map is all but advertising for criminals to take up residence and conduct business there.”

Lois stepped forward and looked up into the strange woman’s face. She was nearly six feet tall, wide at the shoulder and narrow at the waist, with long dark hair framing a classically beautiful face. Her stern, direct eyes were shielded behind stylish plastic-framed glasses which accentuated her appearance rather than detracting from it.

Her hands were long and supple, with more than a hint of strength in them. She looked to be in her late twenties, thirty at the most, and the curves of her body suggested both sensuality and raw power hidden behind expensive designer suits. Physically, she was the kind of woman nearly every other woman wished she were — and who nearly every single man in the world wished he could date.

Lois disliked her almost immediately. “And you are?”

The newcomer’s face slowly opened into a smile. “My apologies. My name is Diana Prince. I am the new public relations liaison for the Greek embassy in Metropolis. I have a few press releases I would like to have published.”

The woman — Diana Prince, Lois reminded herself — held out a thin manila folder. Lois took it without opening it and said, “You know, most PR people either fax over this stuff or e-mail it. And we do have courier services, too.”

Diana smiled again. “All of that is true, but I am new to the city and I prefer to meet people face to face instead of simply bombarding them with documents from an anonymous source. Might I have your name, madam?”

Lois bristled for a moment at being called ‘madam.’ To her, it called forth either a doddering senior citizen or the manager of a brothel, and neither description fit her.

Before she could create an international incident, Clark extended his hand. “My name is Clark Kent, and this is my wife, Lois Lane. We’re both investigative reporters, so I’m not sure we’re the best people to give your press releases to, but I think we can introduce you around.”

Diana gave Clark a brief perfunctory handshake and turned back to Lois. “May I ask why you are attempting to contact Wonder Woman? Or is that something which I do not need to know?”

Lois hesitated. She wasn’t sure how to take this tall, bespectacled, striking brunette. On the one hand, she seemed to be trying for politeness, but on the other hand she’d all but snubbed Clark, which was a dangerous transgression in Lois Lane’s world. However, the woman claimed to be working for the Greek embassy, and her accent revealed that English was not her first language. Maybe she just didn’t know any better.

So Lois decided to play nice for now. “Ah, no, there’s no secret. Wonder Woman is news. We’re reporters. We want to do an in-depth story on her, and we can’t write it without her input. We want to be both fair and comprehensive in our coverage, you know.”

Diana nodded slowly. “I see. I wish I could assist you with your quest, but to my knowledge, no one at the

embassy knows anything more than the local media have reported. At any rate, I wish you success with your story.” She reached out and gently took the folder back from Lois. “If I might prevail upon you to direct me to the person to whom I might give this information, I will trouble you no more.”

Clark raised his hand and called out, “I got it. Jack! Hey, Jack!”

Jack trotted over and slouched in front of Clark. “At your command, my captain, oh great and marvelous one.”

“Very funny. Please show Ms. Prince to the fourth floor and introduce her to Maggie Thomas in circulation. Ms. Prince has some press releases to be published.”

“No problem. If you’ll come with me, Ms. Prince?”

Diana looked him up and down as if evaluating him, then nodded. “You may escort me, young man.”

Jack shot Clark an amused glance over his shoulder as he led his charge toward the elevators. Lois stared after them until they entered an elevator. “She knows more than she’s telling, Clark.”

“What? How did you come to that conclusion?”

Lois gnawed on one fingernail. “I don’t know why I think that, but I do.” She turned to face her husband. “I don’t think we’ve seen the last of her.”

“Maybe you haven’t, but I’d bet I have. Did you see the way she blew me off to talk to you?”

“Yes, and she’s the first woman I’ve ever seen do that. At times, even open lesbians look at you like you’re a really good-looking piece of meat.”

He looked alarmed. “You’re kidding, right?”

She smiled. “Come on, let’s take an early lunch and then see if we can convince Superman to check out Suicide Slum this afternoon.”

He sighed. “I’ll get our jackets. How does Callard’s sound?”

“Mmm, not today. Let’s hit a burger joint. I’m in the mood for something meaty.”

Lois was sopping up the last of her ketchup with the last of her fries when she said, “I think Ms. Prince had a good idea.”

Clark lifted one eyebrow. “When she called you ‘madam’ or when she snubbed me?”

“When she suggested that Superman fly over Suicide Slum to look for Wonder Woman. If he spots her, he should be able to catch her pretty easily. I don’t think she’s as fast as he is.”

“Really? Why do you believe that?”

She slurped the last of her soft drink up through her straw. “When she flew away from the places we saw her, she didn’t accelerate like Superman can. And the one time she flew in to handle that truck fire, she didn’t come in nearly as fast as Superman would have.”

He shook his head. “That’s supposition. Maybe she just has a different rescue style. Maybe she doesn’t like sonic booms.”

Lois shrugged. “Maybe all of that’s true and maybe none of it is, but we won’t know until Superman can convince her to talk to us. I think it’s about time he put in an appearance.”

Clark frowned. “Okay, if you think that’s best.” He stood and kissed her quickly, then grinned. “A ketchup kiss is like a melody.”

“With all that salt on the fries it’s probably more like a spice rack.”

He chuckled. “See you later tonight. Oh, I forgot to tell you, I may be home a little late tonight.”

She looked into his eyes. “Are you planning to have a wonderful time tonight without me?”

“Of course not.” He cocked his head to one side as if looking for something in her face. “I just have some extra research to do. I won’t be too late.”

“Okay. I’ll keep supper warm for you.”

“Oh, that’s really not necessary, Lois.”

“I don’t mind, darling, really.”

He sighed dramatically. “Okay. Just make sure you make enough for the whole fire company this time. Last time we ran out of quiche.”

He tried to dodge her return smack but couldn’t.

Chapter Three

It didn’t take long for Superman to locate Wonder Woman. She was dodging gunfire behind a Cost Mart on Hoover Avenue.

Apparently she had interrupted some kind of illicit exchange between two armed groups of gangsters, and both groups were shooting at her. Superman held back for a moment, watching as Wonder Woman ducked behind a dumpster for cover and then leaped over it to hit the smaller group of four from above. Not surprisingly, the larger bunch of seven kept firing their pistols at her even while she was taking down the smaller bunch, not caring that they might shoot their fellow criminals.

The gunmen apparently considered the sights on their weapons to be simple decorations — like the turn signals on the cars in Metropolis — since only three bullets came anywhere near the tall woman. On the first two, she lifted one fist and a bright flash appeared against her forearm. The third near bullet was similarly deflected away from her legs by a sweeping down-and-outward movement of her other arm similar to a low inside-out block used in many martial arts styles.

Two of the gunmen pulled out automatic weapons, so Superman decided it was time to intervene. He swooped down and grabbed the weapons away from the gang-bangers, then whirled around them until they dropped to the ground, unconscious from lack of oxygen. As long as he didn’t maintain the ultra-low pressure area for too long, he knew that no permanent harm would come to them.

He stopped and landed next to Wonder Woman. “Are you injured?”

Instead of answering, she applauded. The moment reminded him of his first meeting with Lex Luthor on the billionaire’s balcony, when Luthor had sardonically applauded him. It seemed to him, though, that Wonder Woman’s approval was genuine.

Her brilliant smile lit up her face. “That was a most excellent tactic, Superman! I assume that they will recover?”

He turned to check on them. “Yes. One or two might have headaches for an hour or two, but nothing long-term.”

She nodded. “Do you know what they were doing here?”

“All I really know is that they were shooting at you. Were you hit at all?”

She smiled wider and lifted her hands in front of her. “No. I was able to deflect the bullets with my bracelets.”

Superman looked at the metal bracelets covering most of her forearms. As she turned her arms to display them to better effect, he looked deeper, trying to find some flaw or dent in them. All he noticed was a few tiny fragments of lead flattened against them. “Those are some pretty useful bracelets.”

“Yes. I am strong and I heal quickly, but I am not invulnerable as you claim to be.”

He neither confirmed nor denied her assertion. “You had mentioned in one of your interviews that you hoped to meet me. Is there a particular reason for that?”

“There is, yes. Please observe.” She stepped back and turned around slowly as if modeling her outfit. “My costume is red, white, and blue, representing the best of human society.”

“You mean the U.S.?” She nodded. “You should know that this country isn’t perfect. It has many problems, not the least of which is the crime rate.”

“What you say is true, Superman, but America is also the country which is most honest about its problems and seems to be the most determined to correct them. Does China separate its criminal trials from its political structure? Or France, or Russia? Do most countries place their wayward political leaders in the media and reveal everything about them? No. Even the people of England do not enjoy the economic opportunity and level of personal freedom afforded the citizens of this nation. Why do you think so many wish to come here to live and work, many in violation of the laws of this country? Even the illegal immigrants who come here are better off financially than they ever could be in the country of their origin.” She stepped forward and put her hand on his arm. “You have chosen to assist a mighty nation, Superman, and your choice displays true nobility.”

Her praise, combined with her touch, made him uncomfortable, but he wasn’t sure why that would be. “Thank you,” he answered. “Will you stay with these men so I can bring the police?”

She removed her hand and looked around. “I had assumed that they would be here by now. I called them before I engaged these ruffians in battle.”

It was good to know that she was prudent. “Maybe they — wait, I hear the sirens now.”

She tilted her head and waited a long moment, then nodded. “Yes, I also hear them. Your hearing is most acute.” She smiled warmly. “It goes well with your strength and your forbearance. They suit you.”

Okay, he thought, that’s almost creepy.

He tried to reroute the conversation. “Look, I wanted to meet you because you’d mentioned that you wanted to meet me, but you still haven’t explained why. Mind doing that now?”

She stepped back and tilted her head at him. “I think, perhaps, that we should continue that discussion at a later

time, after we have become better acquainted.” She nodded her head toward the street as a patrol car slid around the corner of the alley. “Should we both speak with the police or would you prefer to report this incident yourself?”

“Both of us were involved, so both of us should be interviewed.”

She nodded. “I agree. Perhaps we could continue our discussion later.”

“Fine with me. Oh, there is one favor I’d like to ask you.”

Her eyes lit up. “A favor for the Man of Steel? If it is within my power to accomplish it, this favor shall be done.”

“Maybe you should wait to hear it first.”

She tilted her head to one side and smiled yet again. “I trust you, Superman. You would never ask me to do anything which might be considered wrong.”

He paused for a moment to digest that bit of information, then continued. “I have some friends at the Daily Planet who want to interview you in depth. If it’s not an imposition, they’d like to sit down with you and get your story.”

Her eyebrows rose. “The local print media? Would it not be preferable to deal with a national television audience?”

“I know these folks. They’ll treat you fairly. They won’t try to exploit you in any way. And their story will be picked up and printed by the national media, both print and broadcast.”

She pursed her lips in thought, then nodded. “Very well. I will speak with these people. When should I meet with them?”

“Just call the Daily Planet and ask for either Lois Lane or Clark Kent. They’ll set up the meeting.”

She tilted her head. “I believe that I have met them. The names are familiar to me.”

“They’ve written several stories about you. They’re honest and they won’t try to trap you and they won’t misquote you.”

“I will do as you request. Oh, look, one of the sewer dwellers is attempting to escape.”

He turned to one of the crooks he’d put down. The man was trying to crawl out of sight on his hands and knees. Superman aimed one finger at the man and called out, “Stay down, pal! Don’t make me chase you.”

He pointed at the man until the criminal lay down again and put his hands behind his head. “That’s better,” said Superman. “Now don’t move until the police tell you to.”

“Aw, man, not again!”

Wonder Woman took two abrupt steps in his direction. “Silence, dog! You are fortunate that I have not already slain you!”

The perp’s eyes bugged out and he tried to shove his face into the asphalt.

Superman touched Wonder Woman’s elbow. “Hey, wait a minute here. Unless you’ve got a badge I don’t know about, you can’t threaten these criminals.”

The first car skidded to a stop and two officers jumped out as Wonder Woman hissed, “These men were discussing the sale of a large quantity of illegal pharmaceuticals for the purpose of selling it to addicts! They do not deserve my compassion!”

“Superman!” called one of the officers. “We had a report of multiple shots fired. What happened?”

The two garishly costumed heroes turned almost in unison, but she beat him to it. “I am Wonder Woman. I was the one who contacted you concerning this gathering of pigs.”

The young officer nodded. “Yes, ma’am, I’m sure you did, but we’re responding to the gunfire. Is this all of them?”

“It is.”

He looked around. “How many are still alive?”

She appeared to be taken aback. “Why, all of them. They are not worthy to die at my hands.”

“Ah — right. Okay, Ms. Wonder Woman, can we get your statement?”

“Of course. And you may address me simply as Wonder Woman, young man.”

“Right. Officer Walters, would you take Superman’s statement, please?”

The middle-aged woman glared at the younger male officer but only nodded in response, then accepted Superman’s statement. By the time they were finished, she seemed to be more relaxed.

The young officer who’d taken charge, however, was not having such a good time with Wonder Woman. She answered most of his questions with a condescending tone, and more than once she appeared to grow impatient with him.

“Looks like Billy’s bit off a little more than he can chew,” observed Officer Walters. “That woman don’t like him much.”

“I don’t know why that would be so. He’s just trying to do his job.”

Walters shook her head. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think she didn’t like men in general.”

“Really? What do you know about her that I don’t?”

“Not much.” The older woman pointed at the bickering heroine. “But that suit she’s wearin’ is a teenager’s fantasy outfit. She wants attention, sure, but not from other women. She’s lookin’ for a particular man, and she ain’t willin’ to settle for no boy. Besides, I seen how she was actin’ around you when we drove up.”

“Wh — what? Acting around me? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Walters chuckled. “It means I hope you don’t have a jealous girlfriend, ‘cause that Wonder Woman may be lookin’ at you to be her next ‘relationship,’ as the young folks call it nowadays.” She looked again at Billy trying to deal with the Amazon and sighed. “I better go give him a hand or we’ll be here all day. Thanks for the info, Superman. If you learn anything else, just call the local precinct office. I know you know Sergeant Horowitz.”

“I do. How’s his knee coming along?”

“He’s almost finished with the rehab and getting more antsy to get back on the street. I tell you, if I ever get shot I’m taking medical retirement.” Wonder Woman’s voice hit another decibel level. “Whoops, gotta go.”

Superman stayed long enough to watch Walters calm down both the Amazon and the young officer. By that time, the eleven gangsters had been handcuffed by the other officers on the scene, had heard their Miranda rights

explained, and had been herded into police cars for transporting to the processing center. Another team of officers had gathered the weapons Superman had taken from the shooters, unloaded them, and bagged and tagged each one. Superman was glad he no longer had to impress the bad guys by crushing their firearms. Nowadays he allowed the police to perform ballistic tests on them, and occasionally they used the data to solve other crimes.

It was time to get back to his other job. He lifted into the air and waved once at the officers. Two of them waved back as he flew out of sight.

Wonder Woman was still emphatically giving her statement. He wondered just how detailed that statement would be when it was finished.

Lois didn't even flinch when Clark reentered the news room. He'd finally learned to make that final adjustment on his tie before he stepped into a public area, but other than that it looked to be business as usual at the Daily Planet.

Below the surface, however, Lois felt a curious mix of anticipation and trepidation. She wondered what Clark and Wonder Woman had said to each other. She wondered if he thought her attractive. She wasn't sure she wanted to know whether or not she had found him attractive.

Clark signaled her with his eyes and headed for the conference room. They'd performed this particular piece of seeming telepathy so many times that the veterans on the paper accepted it as the norm, while the newbies held them in awe, wondering if they'd ever once be able to communicate so well without speaking.

Lois closed the door behind her. "So, how'd it go?"

He didn't seem to notice her oddly phrased opening. "I think she's agreed to meet us for an interview."

"You think? You're not sure?"

"I couldn't very well set up an appointment in the Suit, now could I?"

Why was he so snappy? Was it — her?

"Okay, so how did Superman leave the interview question?"

He sighed and seemed to release some tension. "She said she'd call and set up a time with us. That's really about all I could ask her to do."

She frowned and stepped closer. "What's wrong, Clark?" Her hand found his and she gripped it. "What happened out there?"

She was sure he would be pacing if she hadn't grabbed his hand. "I — I'm not sure," he replied. "Something just doesn't quite feel right with her."

"Okay," she replied softly, "then maybe you should sit down and tell me just what happened."

He hesitated and looked into her eyes, then nodded and sat, still holding her hand. "I found her in the middle of a shootout between two groups of gang-bangers in Suicide Slum. She's very fast, very strong, and she has these metal bracelets she uses to deflect bullets."

Lois' eyes widened. "She uses her bracelets to deflect bullets?"

"Yes. I don't know how, but she does. I saw her do it. She's very quick. She said it was because she's not invulnerable like Superman is."

Lois took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Okay, she's got some unusual abilities. What else went down?"

"She'd called the police before she engaged the gunmen, which I thought was wise — or, at least, the calling the police part was wise. After the crooks were all down, she complimented me on my handling of the situation."

Lois paused, then said, "You sound like you didn't appreciate her approbation."

He glanced at her, probably because he was surprised at her vocabulary choices, thought Lois, then he continued, "I liked it until she started describing me like she was writing Superman's Who's Who entry. Or like she was trying to sell me to the highest bidder."

"Huh?"

"Oh, yeah. For a moment I felt like a prize bull with the auctioneer asking for a record bid."

"What?" Lois leaned back. "Clark, that makes no sense at all! Why would she say something like that?"

He dropped her hand and stood, unable to restrain his pacing any longer. "I have no idea! And there's something else. I didn't realize it while I was talking to her, but do you know who she reminded me of?"

"Your mother?"

Clark abruptly stopped pacing and almost spluttered a laugh. "My mother? Good grief, no. They're light years apart." His face grew serious again and he leaned closer. "She reminded me of Mayson Drake."

It was Lois' turn to drop her jaw. "Mayson Drake? I haven't heard that name in years! I don't think I've thought of her for years, either." Wonder Woman reminded Clark of Mayson? It was almost absurd, almost —

It was almost frightening.

Mayson had pursued Clark with single-minded determination despite his attempts to discourage her. She'd focused on Clark to the exclusion of all the other men in her life. And she'd never permitted herself to believe that Clark would end up with any other woman.

Then Lois shook her head and dismissed the comparison. "You must have misread her. She just met Superman today for the first time, right?" Clark nodded. "Then she was just impressed with his strength and control. Some women look at the outside more than they do the inside. Even the best of us sometimes fall into that trap, remember?"

He returned her tiny tease with a slight smile. "I do remember. I don't know, Lois, but maybe you're right, maybe I misread what she said and what she did because of our cultural differences. I don't know what's socially acceptable wherever she comes from, and it's likely she isn't all that familiar with Metropolis customs." He let out a long breath and seemed to relax. "Okay, I'll try to make nice with her. But just to be on the safe side, we'd better interview her together."

Wonder Woman flipped on the communicator and sat down in the comfortable chair, mentally preparing for her mother's disapproval. She'd failed to draw Superman into a personal conversation on their first meeting, which irked her. Over the years, the stories of her mother's first meeting with her father had been transformed from romantic

reminiscences to subtle slights and backhanded critiques of her own actions. She was tired of being compared to the Queen of the Amazons and losing every contest.

Her mother's visage appeared in the viewer, every hair in place and every skin cell in perfect order. Even her smile seemed to obey Hippolyta's merest whim.

"I am here, my daughter. Please report any progress you have made."

That was her mother. Polite to a fault and never putting verbal pressure on her. She'd heard the Queen — what was that term she'd learned today? Oh, yes, 'chew up' younger, less accomplished Amazons who'd made the slightest of mistakes. But Diana had never experienced such a session with her mother, either within the family structure or the government organization, no matter what her offense had been.

Be totally formal with her, thought Wonder Woman. It was the only way to retain any control of the conversation. "I have made contact with Superman, my Queen. I anticipate more such meetings in the near future."

Hippolyta's smile widened microscopically. "That is good news, Diana. I wish you continued success in that endeavor. Have you had the opportunity to make any friends at your job or in your social circle?"

Wonder Woman frowned. Making friends was not her goal here. But it would be better to appear to follow her mother's advice rather than reject it out of hand. "I have met several people, my Queen. I have not yet had the opportunity to pursue those relationships."

"Take your time, my daughter. You have not been in Metropolis for long. And be patient. Sometimes our plans work out in ways other than the way we expect."

That was advice she'd heard hundreds of times before, and it was no more useful this time than at any previous time. Rather than restart that old argument, she said, "I have no further information to report at this time. I do not believe that these people can intercept or decode our signal, but they may be able to detect it. In the interest of our security, I believe we should keep our contacts brief."

Her mother's smile seemed to waver — but surely that was a trick of the viewer. "Very well, Diana. We await your next scheduled contact. Transmission ended."

Wonder Woman flicked off her viewer without repeating the usual polite signoff phrase. She could hardly wait until she had mated, had conceived, and was living by herself — away from her overbearing and suffocating mother.

Hippolyta flipped off her viewer and leaned back in the soft couch. Her sigh did not go unnoticed by her lifelong friend and companion.

Phillipus handed a flagon of light wine to the queen. "Family relations can often be complicated, my Queen."

Hippolyta took a long, almost unladylike pull from the flagon before putting it down on the table beside her. "My relationship with Diana is more than just complicated, Chancellor. She is next in line for the throne, and she must learn to deal with people as more than just subjects or inferiors. Our people — our very survival — may depend on it." She shook her head in exasperation. "If Diana is to succeed me, she must learn to deal with the nations of the

outside world. If we are to come out of hiding after all these centuries, we must have friends upon whom we can rely."

"She does not wish to travel that path. She wishes to restore the ancient traditions."

"She does not understand the ancient traditions! Our ancestors lived as they did from fear of invasion and conquest. My daughter and her followers view them as heroes of the classic mold, not frightened women hiding from men to keep themselves alive. For us to return to those ways would be an unmitigated disaster!"

Phillipus nodded. "That may be true. But if it is so, why did you allow her this chance to gain a daughter of her own? The law requires that she receive such an opportunity, but it does not state a time frame. No one on the council would have disagreed with you had you made Diana wait a few years. Without issue, she cannot rule, yet you are handing her a lance upon which she may soon impale you."

The queen closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose with one forefinger and thumb. "What you say is true, but Diana has enough followers among the younger nobles that I cannot simply command her to obey me. It would be best were she to follow me because she wished to do so." She dropped her hand to her lap. "And I remember my own time among the outsiders. I learned a great deal, much of which contradicted my childish assumptions and attitudes. It is quite possible that my daughter will achieve a level of maturity which would be greater than any she might find here."

The chancellor stood silent for a long moment, then said, "My queen, there are rumors among both the nobles and the commoners that some believe that Eurydice would have been a better choice as our ambassador and representative."

Hippolyta's voice didn't waver. "I have heard those same rumors. Do you believe that we would not have heard the opposite had Eurydice prevailed over her cousin in the contest?"

"I do not."

"But you do not believe that they would have been as persistent or as emphatic as they are now, do you?"

There was no answer for a long moment, then, the chancellor responded, "I believe that we would have heard fewer rumors. I do not believe that there would have been less passion attached to them."

"Ah. Then perhaps the rumors that you would not support my daughter should she ascend to the throne are also true."

Phillipus didn't speak for a long moment, then quietly said, "What I say now is from one friend to another, from one mother to another, not from chancellor to queen. Diana is old enough to take a mate, old enough to bear a child, old enough to succeed to the throne, all according to Amazonian law — but were she to do all of those things I doubt that I would retain my position for long. I doubt that we would remain in hiding for long, and I doubt that Themyscira would remain neutral in the outside world's conflicts. And I am not certain that the outside world would allow such a queen or her land to live in peace." The other woman gathered her robes and stood. "Nor am I certain that I would wish to live in a land ruled by one such as she. So I

hope very much that your wisdom will once again outshine my own and I will be proven wrong.” She bowed and padded softly from the room.

The queen’s muttered response did not escape the chancellor’s exquisite hearing. “As do I, my friend. As do I.”

Chapter Four

As he stood on the central police building’s roof, Superman shook his head in exasperation and some real amazement. If he thought he was busy on a typical night in Metropolis, he’d never get any sleep if he lived in Gotham City. This place was practically a madhouse at times, and tonight seemed to be one of the really bad times.

At least the police seemed to be holding their own against the ‘normal’ criminals out and about. He hadn’t detected any of Gotham’s costumed crazies trying to pull anything. And he doubted that his presence would deter them overmuch.

A whisper of fabric and the scrape of a single tiny pebble alerted him to the presence of his intended conversational partner. Without turning his head, Superman said, “I was wondering how long it would take you to get here.”

A gravelly voice answered him. “I had a couple of things to attend to first. Hope you’ve been amusing yourself.”

That sounded like the notorious Batman. “I’ve been admiring your fair city.”

A tall, deeply muscled male figure resolved itself against the shadows. “I doubt that very much.”

Superman shrugged and turned his gaze out over the city. “No, really, the architecture in downtown Gotham is quite — interesting. Very Gothic, very striking. It definitely has its own character. Metropolis is a bit plain in comparison.”

The Batman stopped at the rooftop’s edge with his arms crossed and his weight balanced for quick movement. “You didn’t come here to discuss the relative merits of Gotham versus Metropolis, either. Why are you invading my territory?”

“You sound a little defensive there.”

“I’m not the one standing on your turf.”

Superman slowly turned to face the Dark Knight. “I’m not ‘invading’ anything or anyone. I’m not here to start a turf war with you. I came to ask a favor.”

Batman didn’t move, but some of the tension bled out of his body. “A favor? For the mighty Man of Steel?”

He couldn’t have known he was echoing another crime-fighter’s words, but Batman’s tone struck Superman as being mocking, completely unlike Wonder Woman’s quick, almost worshipful, agreement earlier that day. “Yes. It can be a quid pro quo if you like.”

“Really? What do you have that you think I might want?”

Superman shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s something you’d have to tell me.”

“Hmph.” The Dark Knight turned and strode to the darkened Bat-Signal. “Why didn’t you activate this to call me? Would’ve saved some time.”

“Maybe, but I didn’t want you to think that the police

were paging you for an emergency. And if you were in the middle of something you’d prefer I didn’t interrupt for something that wasn’t urgent, I didn’t want to upset you for no good reason.”

“You’re telling me that you have exquisite manners?”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to brag, but yes, I do.”

Batman nodded. “More like being pragmatic, I’d think. Or maybe enlightened self-interest.” For a moment, he seemed to wait for a response which didn’t come, then he walked almost within arm’s length of Superman and stopped. “What do you want me to do for you?”

Superman noted that Batman hadn’t actually agreed to do this favor, but he let it pass for the moment. “I assume you’ve heard of Wonder Woman?”

“Heard of her, yes. Don’t know her personally.”

“She’s something of a mystery and I’m not in the best position to investigate her. I’d like to know where she comes from and why she’s in my city.”

“Now’s who’s being defensive?”

Superman decided at that moment not to relate his conversation with Wonder Woman to Batman. “I have more reasons to ask about her than her just showing up and helping the police to fight crime. In all the interviews she’s given, she’s neglected to tell anyone just where her home is and why she’s away from it. She’s dodged every question thrown at her about where her powers come from and just what she’s capable of. And I’m not sure I trust her.”

“But you trust me to look into her for you?”

“After a fashion, yes.”

Batman went still for a long moment, then grunted, “Okay.”

Superman let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “Thank you. How do you want to send me your results?”

“I don’t know how long it will take. Most of the costumed Rogues are either in Arkham Asylum or out of town right now, but as you’re probably aware, the bad guys don’t take vacations all at the same time. You tell me how you want to get whatever I get.”

Superman paused as if in thought, then said, “Send it to me in care of Lois Lane of the Daily Planet. She’ll find me and give it to me.”

“Works for me.” Batman’s head jerked to one side and he stiffened. “Sorry, got a situation needing my attention. Gotta run.”

“Need a hand?”

“From you? Not this time, no.”

“Then maybe you should take the lady along with you.”

“Who — “

“Over on the far side of the roof in the cat-suit. Is that Catwoman?”

A tall, two-legged female feline detached herself from cover which shouldn’t have hidden a mouse and slunk towards the two men. “How’d you find me, flyboy? Heard me breathing?”

“No. I heard the button on your communicator click. I’m thinking you’re the one who tipped Batman that I was here.”

She stopped about three long strides from Superman, keeping him between herself and Batman. “I guess the

reports of your hearing have not been exaggerated.”

“Not in this case. Thanks again, Batman. I hope to hear from you soon.”

With that, he rose into the air and headed south-east towards Metropolis.

Catwoman watched Superman fly away until he disappeared from sight. “Kinda makes you want to give up swinging around on wires, doesn’t it?” she sighed.

“I don’t think I’d want that much power.”

“Of course not. You wouldn’t be able to let loose with those mighty fists of yours.”

Batman grunted.

“Y’know,” Catwoman mused aloud, “I noticed something.” She stopped and waited for her companion to speak, but he just stood there scowling. “Anyway, I noticed that he didn’t offer to clean up Gotham for you.”

Batman grunted again. “He knows I’m better combating crime here than he would be. Despite his unstoppable powers, criminals don’t fear him.”

“And they do fear you.”

“Yes. They know that if I hit them, I’m not going to hold back. If he hits someone, he can’t use anything near his full power or that person won’t just die, he’ll cease to exist.”

“And you love using your full power against the bad guys, don’t you?”

He seemed to frown through his mask. “It works both ways. I doubt I’d be as effective in Metropolis as he is.”

She chuckled. “You’re not as scary in a city with so few gargoyles on the buildings.”

His clenched one fist and slowly opened it. “I could make it there.”

“Sure you could, Bats. Of course,” she teased, “it might have been professional courtesy on his part not to offer you his help. He must know how possessive you are of your bad guys.”

The Dark Knight’s cowl seemed to bend inward as if pulled down by a pair of mighty eyebrows. “You’re not carrying anything that doesn’t belong to you,” growled Batman, “so maybe you should take off before I think too hard about bringing you in.”

She turned her smile on him. “I don’t think you’d better try that, you tall and dark and brooding hunk of crimefighter. Besides, you owe me a solid for tipping you off about the Big Blue Boy Scout being here.”

“I would have found out eventually.”

“Yeah, but you saved yourself a lot of worry over nothing because now you know what he wanted,” she purred. “Hey, why do you think he wants you to dig up the dirt on this Wonder Woman?”

His weight shifted again and she knew he was preparing to leave. “I’ll find that out, too.”

“I bet you will, handsome. Late dinner at the penthouse tonight?”

“That depends on how many emergencies crop up.”

She leaned slightly closer but not enough to touch and spoke with a breathy tone. “There will always be crimes for you to stop and bad guys for you to catch, Batman, but an after-midnight dinner with me is a rare treat. Act now, because this is a time-sensitive offer.”

“How so?”

“It turns into a smashed pumpkin after two o’clock.”

With that, she tossed her own line to the building across the street and swung away.

Lois was in her night clothes — the practical ones — by the time Superman arrived home and spun into Clark Kent. She noted the concerned frown on his brow and decided that she could sacrifice a little sleep tonight.

“Get your errand done?” she asked softly.

“Yes,” he sighed. “And I don’t know if it was the best idea I’ve ever had or if it was a really bad one.”

“Really? That definitely calls for an explanation.”

“You sure you want to hear it?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t.”

His mouth twisted in apparent chagrin. “I asked someone to look into Wonder Woman for me.”

She frowned. “I’ve already canvassed my network of snitches twice. Who do you know that I don’t?”

“Batman.”

Sleepiness fled as if pursued and she actually gasped. “You — you asked Batman to help you? I had no idea you even knew him!”

“I don’t. Well, I do now, but I only met him tonight.”

“And the first thing you asked him to do was to investigate Wonder Woman?”

He nodded. “Anyone who investigates Wonder Woman from Metropolis will probably not be able to keep it secret. But Batman is from out of town, and he seems to have resources we don’t have access to. Besides, I’m confident that he’ll keep it quiet.”

“Wow.” She took a moment to gather her thoughts. “So what’s the next step?”

He sat on the couch beside her and leaned back. “We keep doing what we’ve been doing. We get that interview with Wonder Woman. And when Batman has something for Superman, he’ll contact you at work.”

“Me?”

“I couldn’t very well give him my phone number. This way he won’t connect Superman and Clark Kent any more closely than we already are. Everyone already knows that Lane and Kent have the inside track on Superman.”

The thought that she might meet the mysterious Batman made her grin with anticipation. “What’s he like?”

He closed his eyes and chuckled. “He’s abrupt, gruff, very no-nonsense, stays on task, and seems determined to defend Gotham City to the best of his abilities.”

“No, I mean what’s he like in person?”

His face rolled in her direction. “That is what he’s like in person. If you want a physical description, he’s two or three inches taller than I am, a bit wider and deeper in the shoulders, probably about the same weight as me or a little more, in very good shape and very strong, and he didn’t smile the whole time I was there.”

“No smiling?”

“Not unless he smiled at Catwoman after I left.”

“What!” Lois leaped up from the couch with her arms wide. “You talked to both Batman and Catwoman? And you’re just now telling me about her?”

“She was already on the roof of the police station when I

arrived. I'm pretty sure she told Batman I was there."

"Really?" Lois turned thoughtful. "I wonder if that means — hey, do you think Batman has a secret identity like Superman? Or that he knows Catwoman in his other life?"

He reached up and tugged her down into his embrace. "Could be, but I'm not too concerned about either one of those things. Right now, Mrs. Kent, you need to get some sleep." He hugged her to his chest and kissed her softly. "And even I get tired occasionally."

She grinned up at him. "Do you really think I'll be able to sleep now?"

"I hope so. If not, maybe my gentle snores will exhibit a soporific effect upon you."

She kissed him and relaxed into his arms. "Yeah, that might work."

"In that case, let's head in that direction." He picked her up and headed toward the bedroom.

"Clark?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Do you think Batman could beat Superman in a fight?"

He stopped just inside the doorway. "Who would you bet on?"

She snuggled closer. "My money would be on Superman, of course."

"Good. Although I don't think that fight's going to happen any time soon."

She stifled a monster yawn against his chest. "I hope it never happens."

His suddenly somber tone didn't escape her. "So do I, Lois. So do I."

Jimmy picked up a message slip as Lois stepped off the elevator into the newsroom and waved it at her. "Lois! A woman who said she has a message for you from Wonder Woman just called. Said she'll be at this number for another half-hour or so."

Lois' eyebrows rose. "Really? I'll call her back right now."

"Good. She didn't sound like she wanted to talk to me."

Lois frowned but said nothing. She sat at her desk as Jimmy left to do his own work, then punched in the number as quickly as she could.

A woman's alto answered. "Yes?"

"This is Lois Lane of the Daily Planet. I got a message to call someone at this number."

"Oh, yes, Ms. Lane. This is Diana Prince of the Greek Embassy."

It took Lois a moment to place her, then she remembered the statuesque brunette from her visit to the Planet. "Yes, Ms. Prince, I remember you. Um, I was told that you had a message from Wonder Woman. Is that correct?"

"Yes. The message is that Wonder Woman is willing to meet you for an interview tomorrow morning. She requests that you select some place where she will not be observed by the general populace. Apparently she underestimated her appeal to the common masses."

Ms. Prince's wry tone and word choice puzzled Lois, but she shook it off. "Sounds good to me. What about nine

o'clock on the roof of the Planet?"

The other woman paused, then said, "I believe that would be acceptable. If it is not, I will contact you again."

"Thank you, Ms. Prince. I appreciate your help."

"Think nothing of it, Ms. Lane. Now, I must finish preparing for my own workday. I — Wonder Woman will, I am confident, see you tomorrow morning. Good-bye."

The connection broke before Lois could respond. As she put the handset on the cradle, she thought about the woman at the other end of the conversation.

She claimed to be working at the Greek Embassy, and Lois could easily verify that. Her address should be easy to find, too. But finding out why Wonder Woman sent a message through a PR flack at the Greek Embassy would not be so easy, unless Wonder Woman were to tell them in their interview tomorrow morning.

Speaking of which, she needed to let Perry know about their breakthrough.

His door was open and she leaned her head in. "Chief? Got a minute?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"I just got off the phone with an intermediary for Wonder Woman. Clark and I are going to interview her on the roof of the Planet tomorrow morning at nine."

"The intermediary?"

"No! Wonder Woman."

A grin slowly split the editor's face. "Hey, that's great! I knew you two would come through for me."

She shrugged. "Took us long enough, but we finally broke through."

"You have your questions set up yet?"

"Only in outline form. Clark and I will lock it down as much as we can this morning when he gets in."

"Okay. Speaking of Clark, where is he?"

She shrugged again. "I don't know, Perry. I expected him to be here by now."

Perry lifted his hands in mock exasperation. "Consarn it, Lois! If you two weren't still the hottest team in town — "

"But we are, Chief. Don't worry, we'll get a doozy of a story for you."

Clark came in with a Wonder Woman car wreck rescue story before lunch. Bobby Bigmouth called Lois with a tip on a follow-up story she was working on, and they fed Bobby in Lois' new Jeep. They both worked the tip that afternoon, which unfortunately didn't pan out as they'd hoped. By the time they realized the tip was a dead end, it was time to go home.

As Clark unlocked the door to their brownstone, he smiled at Lois and said, "What do you think about seafood tonight?"

She nodded. "Sounds good to me. I need to eat light anyway. I'm meeting Lin tomorrow afternoon at two-thirty. We're going to finalize our routine for next week's tournament."

He hung up his suit coat and pulled off his tie. "Mind if I come and watch?"

She shook her head. "I'd rather you didn't. I can't afford to be distracted while we're working out the kinks. But I do expect you to be in my corner next Friday night."

He stepped close and gently held her against his chest. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Thank you.” She patted him softly. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to change clothes while you get dinner ready. I want to be fresh and alert for that meeting in the morning.”

Chapter Five

Clark checked his supplies once again. Three automatic pencils, two ballpoint pens, three legal-sized notepads, two digital voice recorders, extra batteries — even though both recorders already contained new batteries — and a small cooler of soft drinks and bottled teas. Two fully charged digital cameras, both with maximum-sized blank memory cards, rested inside a padded case. A golf umbrella with the Planet’s logo on it was folded and leaned against one of the air conditioning exhaust vents on the roof.

Lois smiled and shook her head. “And I thought I was obsessive.”

“You are. It’s just that right now I’m even more obsessive.”

She chuckled and lifted her eyes to the surrounding buildings. “Do you see her yet?”

He reached up and touched his glasses, then lowered his hand without moving them. “No. And I don’t like the look of these clouds. Perry would throw a fit if this interview got rained out.”

“Well, she’s still got eight minutes before she’s not punctual, thirteen minutes before she’s fashionably late, and about twenty-three minutes before she’s just downright rude.”

A woman’s alto voice came from behind them. “In that case, I believe that I am a bit early.”

Both Clark and Lois spun around in surprise. Neither of them liked having someone sneak up on them, and Lois knew that Clark especially hated it. It meant that Wonder Woman might have more abilities than she’d shown thus far.

Wonder Woman was standing beside the roof exit, wearing a man’s fedora and an open trench coat over her glitzy uniform. She took off the hat and shook out of the coat as she said, “I apologize for startling you. I am still learning what is and what is not polite in your society.” She folded the coat and placed it on a piece of ductwork, then put the hat on top. “I flew up from the alley below. I am fairly certain I was not observed, but I assure you that I did not intend to arrive in such a mysterious fashion.”

Lois took a deep, calming breath before answering. “That’s okay. I guess we just assumed you’d swoop down out of the sky like Superman usually does. We shouldn’t have done that, and I’m sorry.”

“I am not offended, Ms. Lane. Are you ready to begin our interview?”

“Yes. You remember Clark Kent, I hope? He’s my husband and partner.”

Clark slowly extended his hand. “I’m pleased to meet you, Wonder Woman.”

The garishly clad woman looked at his hand for a moment, then slowly took it in hers. As she squeezed, he said, “Wow! You’ve got quite a grip there.”

“For a woman, you mean, Mr. Kent?”

“For anyone, actually. Um — may I have my hand back?”

She released his hand and he shook it several times as if the blood had been forced out of it. Wonder Woman smirked at him, then turned and offered her hand to Lois.

Lois’ hand remained at her side. “You’re not going to prove you’re stronger than I am, are you?”

“No! Of course not. We are sisters, and there is no need for me to demonstrate my superiority in regard to you.”

Cautiously, Lois lifted her hand. The taller woman’s grasp was firm but not painful, and Lois wondered why she’d tried to embarrass Clark.

But that question might come later, if at all. “Are you ready to begin our interview?”

Wonder Woman gestured at Clark. “Is this man here as your assistant?”

Lois’ eyebrows rose, but before she could reach her boiling point, Clark said, “Yes, I’m her assistant today. I’ll take care of whatever needs taking care of.”

Wonder Woman nodded once. “Very well. Let us begin. What is your first question, Ms. Lane?”

“Could we get a few pictures first?” interposed Clark. “To go with the article, of course.”

Lois spent the time Clark used in posing Wonder Woman for the pictures in calming herself. It wasn’t just that the woman all but snubbed Clark, but that she seemed to actively dislike him simply because he was a man. And that kind of discrimination always set Lois Lane on edge, no matter which direction it flowed.

But she’d maintain control, both for the sake of the story and for Clark’s sake.

After a few moments, Wonder Woman lifted an imperious palm to Clark. “I believe you have sufficient photographs of me, Mr. Kent. We should begin the interview. Ms. Lane, what do you wish to ask?”

“Ah — perhaps this will go better if you simply call me Lois.”

The tall brunette smiled. “Thank you for your courtesy. I will be pleased to address you as Lois.”

“Good. Would you allow us to record this interview?”

“I assume you mean electronically?”

“Yes. How else — never mind. May we record the interview?”

“Please do so. I would not wish to be misquoted.”

“Thank you. Ready, Clark?”

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am, we’re ready.”

She’d have to make this up to him later, she mused. Lois smiled blandly and opened her notepad. “First question is, what’s your real name? I can’t believe your parents named you Wonder Woman.”

The heroine chuckled. “No, they did not. The title is an appellation of honor among my people. I am sorry, but I am not at liberty to reveal my true name at this time.”

Lois nodded. “Okay. Can you tell us where you come from?”

“My home is the island nation of Themyscira. We sometimes refer to it as Paradise Island. I sincerely doubt that you have ever heard of it.”

Lois glanced at Clark, who returned a microscopic shake. “No, we haven’t. Can you tell us anything about your

home, like where it is, what kind of government you have, what your culture is like, anything like that?”

Wonder Woman crossed her arms in apparent thought. “I am also not at liberty to reveal the location of Themyscira, but I can tell you that it is cloaked, hidden from the outside world.”

“Cloaked? You mean like Star Trek cloaked?”

“I regret that I do not know what that means.”

“Oh.” Lois paused, then continued. “How is it cloaked? Do you have a perpetual fog around it, do you use some kind of machine to hide it, what?”

“It is hidden by a machine, a technology which the outside world does not seem to possess. Unfortunately, since I am not well versed in those sciences, I cannot explain it further.”

“So you don’t know how it works?”

“Only that it bends electromagnetic waves and particles around the island, rendering it invisible to both the naked eye and to any instruments one might use to attempt to locate it. I am unable to explain further.”

“I see. Okay, can you tell me about your government?”

“Gladly. We are ruled by an hereditary matriarchy. The queen is the ultimate power, of course, but she is assisted by a court of nine advisors selected by the nobles and approved by a general election. We also have a chancellor who is selected by the queen and approved by the Court of Nine. Each member of the Court serves a single five-year term and may be asked to serve another term after another five years have passed. Both the queen and the chancellor hold office until either death or voluntary relinquishment of the office. The queen is then succeeded by her eldest daughter who has borne her own daughter. The chancellor is succeeded by one selected by the queen and approved by the court.”

“Interesting. Does the chancellor have to step down when a new queen gets promoted?”

“No. Nor may the queen relieve the chancellor of her duties. The queen is most powerful, but there are checks and balances within the system.”

“I guess it works for you.”

“It has functioned in this manner for nearly two millennia. I see no reason to alter its makeup at this time.”

“I didn’t mean to sound as if I was criticizing your country. I’m sorry if that’s how it came across to you.”

“No, it is my fault. I am somewhat sensitive about such things. I am next in line for the throne when my own daughter is born, and the thought of changes to the government I will inherit disquiets me.”

“Then let’s talk about something else. Where are you staying in Metropolis, assuming that is where you’re living at the moment?”

“I do reside in Metropolis, but I am once again not at liberty to reveal the location of my domicile. Judging by the response of the people of this city to celebrities, I doubt that I would have much peace.”

“You’re probably right. Can you tell us why you’re here in our city?”

Wonder Woman turned and took two steps away from Lois, then turned around again and returned. “I am searching for a suitable mate.”

“You — you’re doing what?”

“I am searching for a suitable mate. It is what my mother did when she believed it was time for her to bring me into being, and what her mother did when Hippolyta was conceived. All Amazons become mothers in this fashion.”

It was so far from anything Lois had expected that she couldn’t respond at first. Clark apparently sensed her shock, because he leaned forward and asked, “Have you met anyone who might qualify? I’m sure you have very high standards.”

Wonder Woman scowled at him for a long moment, then said, “I have indeed met a man who would qualify, although I have not spoken with him about the subject. But I can assure you, Mr. Kent, that man is not you.”

“That’s okay, I’m already married.”

Wonder Woman inhaled deeply. “Yes, I had forgotten for the moment. Thank you for reminding me.” She moved in front of Clark and said, “Tell me, how do you view your wife?”

He frowned. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“I mean to ask you if you treat your wife as a servant, a cook, a maid, or a drudge. I mean to ask you if you grant her any independence at all.”

Clark took a half-step back and said, “Maybe you should ask her those questions.”

The costumed heroine tilted her head to one side and stared at him for a moment, then said, “I do not believe that will be necessary. You seem to hold your wife in high regard, a quality which other men in your world seem to lack. Perhaps I was too hasty in my evaluation of you, Mr. Kent.”

Lois finally found her voice. “Wonder Woman, I can assure you that Clark neither owns me nor rules me. But he does love me, and I love him. And I neither own him nor rule him. But that’s our personal life. What we’re doing now is our profession. And I’d prefer that we keep this interview on that level. If you don’t mind, that is.”

Wonder Woman turned to Lois and smiled thinly. “I concur. I apologize for changing the subject. Have you other questions to ask me?”

Lois took another deep, calming breath. “Yes. The people of Metropolis are pretty familiar with Superman’s powers. Do you have the same abilities that he does?”

“No. I am blessed with great strength, and I am able to fly great distances at speeds just below the speed of sound. I can also run faster than any human, and I can deflect projectiles aimed at me, such as bullets or arrows or spears, with my bracelets. But while my sight and hearing seem to be significantly more acute than the human norm, I do not have those special abilities which Superman possesses.”

“What about your lasso? I’m told you can compel people to tell the truth by using it on them.”

Wonder Woman lifted the golden lasso from her hip and displayed it for Clark and Lois. “Legend among my people calls this lasso ‘magic,’ but it is not. It sends an electro-encephalic surge into the person who wears it from the person who wields it. The surge is too weak to cause permanent damage, but it breaks down the person’s ability to deceive the wielder. It can also be used to control an

individual for a short time.”

“Just a short time?”

“Yes. I cannot force someone to change his or her personality or behavior permanently. As I said, it is not magic, merely an advanced technology. And I am the only one who may wield this particular item. It is keyed to my own brainwaves and is no more than a fancy rope to anyone else.”

“Very interesting. Can you tell us why you wear such a revealing costume? Most women in Metropolis wouldn’t dare appear in public in so little, even if they looked as good in it as you do.”

“Do you believe I look good in it, Lois?”

“Yes. But that doesn’t answer my question.”

Wonder Woman laughed softly. “No, it does not. And you are indeed as tenacious as I have been told. Very well, I will tell you that this is also a traditional costume among my people, save the tiara, which is mine by royal birthright. The costume is given to the winner of a competition among the nobles without issue when she goes out from the palace to seek a mate and gain a daughter of her own.”

“I see.”

Clark lifted his hand. “Excuse me? I have a question, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind,” said Lois. “Wonder Woman?”

“Please, Mr. Kent, ask your question.”

“Thank you. In all the discussion we’ve had on your society, your government, your culture, I haven’t heard you mention a male person. Why is that?”

“Why, because we are a society of warrior women. I was under the impression that you already knew that fact.”

“No,” Lois said, “we didn’t. And it’s very interesting. Does that mean that a woman who wants to have a child must find a man from somewhere else? Or is there a separate living area for the men in your country?”

“There are no men at all on Themyscira, Lois. That is why I am here and not there. I must bear a daughter in order to qualify as the next in line for the throne.”

“Then where do your — your husbands live?”

“Many choose to continue to reside in their own country, but quite a few have established a small settlement on a nearby island. Each has his own dwelling where he may work at his chosen profession. There are several very good goldsmiths there, along with wheelwrights, blacksmiths, stonemasons, architects, and one who calls himself a computer genius, whatever that is. And before you ask, I am not permitted to disclose their location.”

“Okay,” Lois said. “Is there some time limit on your having a daughter? Is this something urgent that you need to get done right now?”

“No, actually, it is not. I am now twenty-four years old, but our law states that I must have a daughter before I am forty-five else I am no longer in the line of succession.”

Lois nodded, thinking, then something occurred to her. “Tell me, if your society is one of only women, what happens to any male children born on your island?”

“Ah. You assume, then, that we toss them into the sea to drown, or that we perform some barbaric ritual on them to slay them?”

“No. I’m not assuming anything. I’m asking a question.”

“Very well. Centuries ago, when our nation was first founded, there are legends that male children were sometimes killed, either at birth or before their first birthday, when all Amazonian children must be examined by the Court of Nine. But that has not happened for many centuries, assuming that it happened then. Male children are placed into the care of foster families in nations near ours. But this does not occur often. Female births outnumber male births by an eleven-to-one ratio, and the birth of any child is an occasion for rejoicing.”

“Why the discrepancy? Why so many girls born over boys?”

“Partly because we control conception medically, and partly because our bodies seem to prefer girls in our wombs rather than boys. Miscarriages are quite rare in Themyscira, but statistically speaking, there are far more male babies lost than female babies.”

Lois nodded. “Let’s talk about some of the things you’ve been doing since you’ve been here. Since you state that you’re looking for a suitable mate, why are you performing rescues and helping to stop crime?”

“Should I refrain from such activities?”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m only asking why you’re doing these things.”

“Because I am needed.”

“Really? We have the regular police and fire departments to handle most of those situations, and the Metropolis emergency medical teams are among the leaders in the world. Why, specifically, are you needed?”

Wonder Woman frowned and crossed her arms again. “It is incumbent upon me to assist lesser beings in their time of need. The burden is placed upon me by my family, by my people, by the costume I wear and the mission I must accomplish, and by the debt owed to the common class by the noble class.”

“We don’t have nobles in this country. There are class differences, but we’re constantly working to overcome them.”

“Yes, I have noticed this. It is most puzzling.”

Clark lifted his hand again. “Excuse me? I have another question.”

“Proceed, Mr. Kent.”

“Superman is from another planet. Krypton doesn’t exist any more, but there is a colony of Kryptonians on another world who are working to build a society there. I know you’ve already told us that you’re from Themyscira, but are you from Earth or are you from some other planet, like Superman is?”

“Interesting question, Mr. Kent. I was born on this planet. To my knowledge, all of my ancestors were also born on Earth. If there is an alien heritage within any of us, it is hidden from both myself and our own genetic scientists.” She glowered at him. “Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

He only smiled. “Yes. Thank you.”

“Have you any more questions, Lois?”

“Yes. We’d like to know your impressions of Metropolis, its people, its culture, that kind of thing.”

“Ah. A safe subject. I am impressed with some aspects of your city. I find the architecture somewhat sterile, but I

believe that my impression arises from my preference for stone buildings over steel ones. And I find that most of the people here are always in haste to perform some task, usually with the intention of improving their financial situation.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, it is not a problem, Lois, but it is different from home. There, we all work for the betterment of our entire society. Everyone has a role to fill, and everyone is trained to fulfill that role.”

“What if someone decides that she wants to fulfill some other role?”

“Sometimes a sister will desire to alter her vocation. If she is able to demonstrate a talent for her new career choice, she is allowed to pursue it.”

“That sounds pretty strict to me.”

“Perhaps, but our society has endured for more than a millennia. Our laws and traditions have sustained us for all of that time. Our nation thrives today because of that strictness.”

“I can see that. So how would you compare our society to yours at home?”

Wonder Woman paused in thought, then said, “You are chaotic and disorganized. You exhibit a great energy, but it is wild and undirected. Yet this seemingly aimless fury seems to work for you. You allow your citizens the freedom to choose their own paths, even if those paths lead to harm to the body politic. I am still attempting to understand you.”

“I hope we can help you in that understanding.”

She nodded, then turned to Clark. “What of you, Mr. Kent? Do you desire to help me understand your society?”

“Yes,” he answered. “I believe that understanding others is one of the first steps toward making fast friends with those others.”

“And you would prefer to understand these others instead of ruling them for their own good?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting. Your thoughts are fascinating, Mr. Kent. It appears that I have indeed misjudged you, and for that I apologize.” She turned to Lois and said, “I regret that I must depart at this time. I have an appointment which cannot be postponed. I hope I have satisfied your desire for an interview.”

“You have, Wonder Woman. Thank you very much.”

“Thank you, Lois. I look forward to reading the article when it is published. Do you know when that might be?”

“Tomorrow morning, probably, unless something absolutely huge pushes it off the front page. You’re big news.”

The costumed woman smiled in apparent satisfaction. “I will examine the Daily Planet tomorrow.” Then she donned the fedora and trench coat and walked silently to the edge of the roof. She looked around, then stepped into thin air and floated down out of sight.

Lois and Clark looked at each other for a long moment, then she said, “Your desk or mine?”

He lifted his face to the sky, and Lois saw tiny raindrops speckling the lenses in his glasses. “I think yours. And make sure you put your name first on the byline. I don’t want her re-thinking her revised opinion of me.”

Hippolyta frowned at the viewer again. Diana was almost ten minutes late for her scheduled contact. She hoped that her daughter had found someone who needed her help and had not simply ignored her schedule.

Then Diana’s face appeared in the viewer. “This is Diana reporting. I greet you, my queen, and I humbly beg your forgiveness for my tardiness.”

Hippolyta forced a smile and nodded. “It is good to hear from you, daughter. Have you anything of import to impart?”

Diana’s face froze for a moment. She either didn’t understand the levity, or, more likely, simply didn’t approve. “I have given an interview to the Daily Planet,” she finally said. “As prescribed by our law, I revealed nothing concerning Themyscira’s location.”

“I expected nothing else, my daughter.”

“I must report that I have not spoken with Superman since our last contact.”

“You have time. There is no reason for undue haste.”

“Of course. If there is nothing else — “

“A moment. You mentioned an interview?”

“Yes. The Daily Planet, the most prestigious print news organization in Metropolis.”

“Do you know when this interview will be published?”

Diana’s brows drew down. “I assume you wish to cut it out and add it to your scrapbook record of my life?”

Hippolyta tried to hide the hurt she felt. “I believe that all of our sisters would be interested in such an interview.”

The face in the viewer softened slightly. “Of course. The reporter with whom I spoke believes it will be published tomorrow morning, local time.”

“Thank you. We will obtain a copy for our royal archives.”

“Do you wish for me to purchase a copy and send it to you?”

It was the closest thing to an apology to come from the mouth of the princess in nearly a decade. “There is no need. We will assign that task to another.”

“As you wish. If there is nothing else, I will terminate this contact.”

“No, nothing else. May you be blessed in your quest, daughter.”

Diana seemed to hesitate, then her face vanished from the screen. Hippolyta let out a deep sigh.

A young woman bent to pour wine in a tall vessel. The queen glanced up at her and said, “Thank you, Myrhha.”

Myrhha smiled and nodded, then turned to leave, but Hippolyta stopped her. “Wait. I wish to ask you something.”

“Anything, my queen.”

“What do you — how do you — oh, this is so frustrating!”

Myrhha stood beside the queen with her hands folded demurely in front of her and said nothing. Hippolyta stood and paced around the room. “Myrhha, how do you deal with your daughters when they behave in such a disrespectful and hostile fashion?”

The younger woman suddenly looked afraid. “My lady — my queen — it is not for me to advise the crown — “

“Oh, bother the crown!” She took her servant’s hands in

hers and pulled her closer. “For the moment, I ask you to forget that I am your queen and you are my maid. I ask you, woman to woman and mother to mother, do you have any advice for me on how to speak with my daughter?”

Myrhha looked into the queen’s eyes and apparently decided that the older woman was sincere. “My lady, I wish I had some useful advice for you. I wish I had some insight into the workings of young, headstrong women who think more highly of themselves than they ought. But, sadly, I do not.”

Hippolyta sighed and released Myrhha’s hands. “I am sorry. I ask too much of you and I have made you most uncomfortable. I apologize.”

“There is no need, my lady. It is I who should apologize, for you have asked honest counsel of me when I have none to give.” She hesitated, then asked, “Might I summon Chancellor Phillipus to you?”

The queen laughed ruefully. “She advised me to ask you what to do.”

Myrhha ducked her head. “Then I have failed you doubly, my lady.”

Hippolyta smiled and touched the maid’s face. “You have done no such thing! You have spoken honestly to me when I was the one who presumed on our relationship.” She took Myrhha’s hands again. “You have served me faithfully for many years, and I expect you to continue to do so.”

“That is my wish also, my queen.”

“Then I will delay you no longer with my own petty family problems. Please, resume your tasks.”

Myrhha hesitated, then said, “I would say one more thing, my queen. With your Highness’ permission, of course.”

“Say on.”

“If I have a problem in my relationship with one of my daughters, it affects our household only, because none look to us to lead them. If the queen, however, has difficulties with her daughter, it affects us all.” Her eyes bored into the queen’s. “I know that you believe me to have taken your daughter’s side over yours in matters of state, that I desire a return to the old traditions more than I value the peace of our land. That may or may not be true. But I do know that a haughty queen would never ask a commoner’s opinion concerning a sensitive family matter. You have done so. For what my personal respect might be worth, you have more than earned it.” She paused, then continued. “And you have earned my loyalty to the death.”

“What? Myrhha, you are not obligated to — “

“This is not from any sense of obligation, my queen. This is woman to woman.” She smiled shyly. “Mother to mother, if you like.”

Hippolyta’s smile was sincere. “Thank you. And I do like it, very much.”

“Thank you, my queen. I must return to my duties now.”

The queen nodded and allowed her to slip away, grateful that the younger woman had committed her personal loyalty freely and fully, and secure in the knowledge that she would never turn away from that commitment.

Lin raised her hand to halt the exercise and Lois relaxed slightly. “I believe that we’re done, Lois. We’ve performed

the routine three straight times without a mistake. Let’s take it to the warehouse.”

“The warehouse?”

“Isn’t that the correct idiom? Oh, no, I meant to say ‘take it to the house.’ Sorry.”

Lois chuckled. “No problem, Lin. And taking it to the house sounds good to me. I’m starting to get tired.”

“Starting? You’ve worn me down today! Lois, you are by far the best student in the entire dojo.”

“Oh, come on, I’m not that good.”

“My granddaughter speaks the truth, Ms. Lane,” said Master Chou. “You are indeed her best student. In some ways, you are even her equal. Do you not agree, Lin?”

The women bowed to him. “I do agree, Grandfather.”

He returned the bow and smiled. “Will you both come and talk to an old man for a few minutes? I have few friends left and my words require an outlet.”

Lois glanced at Lin, who nodded. “We would be honored to hear your words, Grandfather.”

“Then come and sit with me at my table. I have fresh tea and my grandson’s favorite pastry.” He smiled conspiratorially and lowered his voice. “We will not tell him that we ate them all.”

The women laughed and followed him. The Master poured tea for each of them and offered each woman a strawberry tart. Lois shook her head, but Lin said, “Please, Lois, you’ll regret it if you don’t take one. They are outstanding.”

With a small grin, Lois bit into hers and immediately made yummy noises. “Wow! That is truly delicious. Where did you get them?”

“From a friend of mine,” answered Master Chou. “He sometimes pays his son’s class fees in food.”

Lin smiled as Lois devoured her treat. “If our opinion matters to him, Grandfather, you may tell him that we both approve whole-heartedly.”

Her mouth full, Lois only nodded.

“I am pleased, and I am confident that Mr. Trung will also be pleased. But now I wish to discuss something else with both of you.”

Lin sipped her tea and waited for her grandfather to find the right words. He finally said, “Do you remember, Ms. Lane, what I told you when I first met you?”

Lois nodded. “You told me that my head and my heart were not in the same place.”

“That is correct. Since then, however, your head and your heart have come together, and they are in harmony. And your chi has grown substantially since that day. In fact, your chi is nearly as strong as your husband’s. It is as if you draw strength from him, as he surely draws from you.”

“He’s the strongest man I know, inside where it counts.”

“You understand, then, when I say that your strength equals his in many ways.”

Lois crinkled her forehead. “I think I should thank you.”

“I am making an observation, Ms. Lane, not giving you a compliment for flattery’s sake. If I were not aware of my granddaughter’s chi, I would say that yours is the strongest chi of any of my students.”

Now she looked surprised. “Really? What about your male students?”

“Some are strong but unfocused. You, however, are very focused. The only problem is that you are almost out of balance.”

“Grandfather,” Lin put in, “remember what we talked about? How women are different from men in many ways?”

He frowned at her. “I need no instruction on women from my own granddaughter! Have you forgotten that you once had a grandmother? I have not, nor have I forgotten the lessons she taught me.” He turned back to Lois. “When we first met, I confess that I had put those lessons aside. But you reminded me of her so much, Ms. Lane, and I was shamed into admitting my grave error.”

Lois smiled. “I’m just glad you decided to teach me.”

“Ah, but it is my granddaughter who has taught you. And she has done a masterful job. In fact, were you to aspire so high, you might be the next to wear the Dragon’s Heart bracelets.”

Lin almost laughed at Lois’ expression. For a moment she thought her friend would fall off her chair.

“Wh-what!” Lois sputtered. “Me? The Heart of the Dragon? You’ve got to be kidding!”

The old man shook his head and smiled. “I do not kid. Lin is indeed worthy to wear them, and it is right that she decide to whom she will pass them on. And you could be that person — if you so desired. And having such a goal in your life might, I believe, be the factor which would restore the full balance of your chi.”

“But — but I’m not Chinese!”

Lin and her grandfather both laughed. “No one’s perfect, Lois,” she said.

“In the past,” he said, “that alone would have disqualified you, as would your being a woman. But no more. Lin has shown me the error of my ways.”

“And you don’t have to make a decision now, Lois,” Lin added. “No pressure at all. We just wanted you to be aware that you have this choice.”

Lois cut her eyes at Lin and scowled. “You two set me up, didn’t you?”

“Lin and I have discussed this subject at length, yes, and we are in agreement that you should have this opportunity should you wish to pursue it.”

Lois sat back in her chair. “Thank you,” she replied. “I — I really don’t know what to say!”

Master Chou smiled. “You need say nothing at this moment. Merely think on it. You have plenty of time. Two years, three at the most, however.”

“Two years? Is that all? Wow, I’d better start thinking fast.”

The three of them shared one more chuckle. “Lois and I must each go home now, Grandfather. Thank you for the tea and for the pastries. They were as sweet as your words.”

The women stood, and Lois bowed deeply. “I am honored that you have considered me worthy of such a mark of respect. I will do my best to fulfill your expectations of me.”

“You have already exceeded them, Ms. Lane. Go in peace and walk in honor.”

It had been a quiet Saturday night for Gotham, and Batman returned to the cave rested and slightly restless with

unexpended energy. It would be a good time to go back to the request Superman had made of him.

As he’d expected, the usual avenues of investigation yielded very little. Wonder Woman hadn’t appeared anywhere else that he could find, except for a few older mentions in some personal diaries. They were far too old to refer to this woman, but the descriptions of her abilities seemed to line up with what little he already knew about her.

Maybe Alfred’s suggestion that Wonder Woman was a role to be played rather than a personal identity held more validity than he’d first thought. It seemed that at certain past times in Europe, and later in the Americas, a woman with extraordinary powers would appear, perform heroic deeds for a brief time, and then “mysteriously vanish into the fog from whence she had come.”

He chuckled at the archaic phrase. It had appeared in one of the diaries, but it seemed to describe the behavior of each of the women mentioned. Their physical descriptions, aside from all of them being beautiful, differed in height, coloring, hair length and color, and voice timber. The only other constants were that each diarist — all of whom were unmarried — had eventually succumbed to the mystery woman’s charms and taken her into his bed, where she had made him happier than he had ever been before.

And not long after that, either she had vanished from his life forever or he vanished along with her. Most curious. It seemed as if the women were simply looking for a certain type of man to father their children.

He’d need to lock that particular piece of information down before he told Superman about it. No sense in alarming the man without cause.

Batman checked his instruments. A powerful high-frequency EM burst had shown up on his sensors on the previous afternoon, and it didn’t correspond to any known military or civilian transmission protocol. In fact, it shouldn’t have been there at all. As he reviewed the record, he realized that decoding it would test his limits, assuming he could crack the code at all.

The Sunday morning Daily Planet carried the Lane and Kent interview with Wonder Woman. He smiled as he read it. Wonder Woman had obviously tried to reveal as little information about her homeland as was possible, but the subtle hints in the text combined with the transmission he’d picked up told him a great deal. And he’d learn volumes more if he could decode it.

He nodded and rubbed the bridge of his nose where his cowl sometimes rubbed it raw. He could see why Superman wanted more information than Lane and Kent had printed. This woman had the potential to be quite dangerous, and he had no protocols set up to deal with someone like her.

Maybe it was time to do just that.

Chapter Six

Perry waited for all of the Monday-morning sleepyheads to get their first cup of coffee down, then he stepped out of his office and onto the newsroom floor. “All right, folks,” he called out, “y’all listen up. I know that each and every one of you read Lane and Kent’s front-page story on Wonder Woman yesterday, right?” Everyone in the newsroom nodded in agreement. “Good! Then I know that

each and every one of you will cooperate with Lois and Clark on Wonder Woman. And here's how you'll do it."

Perry paused and turned slowly, catching each reporter's eyes in turn. "Anything — and I mean any tiny little thing — you hear, see, read, witness, or think up, you take it to Lois and Clark. They're responsible for all Wonder Woman reporting until I say different."

A startled Eduardo lifted his hand first. "Chief, does that mean that we call them if we just happen to be covering something and Wonder Woman shows up? Are you taking our stories away from us?"

Perry lifted his hands over the growing murmur. "Hold up! Hold up, okay? No, I don't mean that. If you're covering a liquor store holdup or a bank robbery and Wonder Woman shows up, you write it up. Your name will go under the headline. But after you turn in the story, you let Lois and Clark know everything that happened. They are the Wonder Woman clearinghouse for the Daily Planet. Nobody loses a byline, people, but you have to keep them in the loop." He paused and glared at the assembly. "Any more questions?"

There were none. "Fine. You people get back to work. Wonder Woman isn't the only person in the news, you know."

The crowd slowly dispersed as Perry turned to the hottest team in town. "That really was a terrific interview, you two. What's next?"

Lois shrugged. "Now we wait for Wonder Woman to do or say something else newsworthy."

"Assuming, of course," Clark chimed in, "that the 'ideal mate' she mentioned doesn't call a press conference and scoop us."

"Yeah, that's the big loose end in your story. Got any idea who this mystery man might be?"

The reporters looked at each other as if communicating telepathically, then turned back to him and in unison said, "No idea."

"What about a reaction interview with Superman? I bet he's got some interesting things to say about her."

Clark's mouth twitched as if he were trying not to smile. Lois' eyes narrowed in seeming vexation. And he couldn't imagine why the two of them would have such different reactions to his suggestion about interviewing Superman.

"That's a good idea, Perry," Clark said. "We'll try to get something from him in the next couple of days."

Perry looked from one to the other and back again. Clark looked like he'd just been told a funny joke in church during a sermon. Lois looked like she'd just bitten into an apple and found half a worm. He sighed and said, "Okay, you two, keep at it. I have faith in you. I bet you'll know who this 'ideal mate' character is before next Monday."

As they strode away to do his bidding, he sighed. Back when he'd known that Clark was Superman but hadn't wanted either of them to know that he knew, it had been tough at times. Now that they knew that he knew, it was easier, but making sure that no one else picked up any clues from his conversations with them was still stressful.

Still, he'd rather have that stress than wonder why Clark had the bladder control of a gerbil.

She always felt joy when flying through the clouds, but today Diana was frustrated. Despite the broad hint she'd given the reporters — and which they had obligingly printed — Superman had not attempted to contact her. Surely he was not that dense. Surely he could read her meaning in the interview.

Or perhaps it was her fault for not communicating more clearly. She had not been completely open with him at their first meeting. Of course, she really had not had the opportunity to be open with him. The police had arrived before they had spoken of deeper matters.

But surely Superman needed a mate! And who else could fulfill that role so well as she? What other woman was suitable for the Man of Steel?

The reporter for the Daily Planet, for example — Lois, that was her name — was intelligent and talented and dedicated, but she was not Diana's equal in fighting prowess or in heritage. Diana had investigated her background and discovered that her mother was a recovering alcoholic, that her father was a renowned doctor but was away for months at a time, and that her sister was in the midst of a divorce, which was yet another institution of the outside world which baffled Diana. If this Lucy person disliked her husband enough to dissolve their marriage, why didn't she simply challenge him to a duel and kill him? It was much simpler that way.

The piece of information which convinced Diana that even a woman such as Lois Lane was totally unsuitable for Superman was her childless state. She and her husband — a decent man, if a bit dull — had been married for half a decade, yet there were no children. In Diana's mind, that made Lois less of a woman than if she had been a drug addict. A woman who could not — or perhaps would not — conceive a child was somehow flawed, according to Amazonian mores.

She wondered where Superman spent his time when he was not performing his feats of strength. His total time in the public eye over the days since Diana had arrived in Metropolis totaled less than four hours. Diana had another job which took up much of her time, but why would Superman —

She suddenly lost altitude and velocity as the realization struck her. Of course! What a fool she was! It was another way in which they were so very alike! When he was not flying about in his blue-and-red suit, Superman spent his time pretending to be a normal man! Why had she not seen it before?

Because, up until the present moment, she had believed that her idea to masquerade as Diana Prince, public relations director for the Greek Embassy, was a brilliant and original idea. She had never conceived that Superman might wear another set of clothes when he was not fighting for truth and justice, and it was because her pride did not permit her to believe that she was anything less than the most intelligent and cunning Amazon on Paradise Island.

Chagrin filled her mind. She had misjudged not only Superman, but she had misjudged herself. It was difficult to admit that she had made a serious mistake, even to herself, but this mistake could easily be rectified.

And the course she would chart toward that goal was

clear. She would discover Superman's other identity, contrive to confront him in that guise at a time when she wore the aspect of Diana Prince, and reveal to him that she had penetrated his disguise. Surely his respect for her would rise as a result, and she would then be able to suggest that they explore a personal relationship.

It would work! It was a foolproof plan. Even though Superman was super-powered, he was only a man, and was therefore inferior to her, despite her mother's irritating platitudes about sexual equality. Even the seeming equality between Lois Lane and Clark Kent had to be a false front. Surely Clark, who was in truth merely a cowardly man, attempted to dominate Lois in several important ways when no one might see. It was obvious that he attempted to mask his inferiority by mistreating his wife, and that he attempted to mask that abuse by seeming to treat her as an equal in public. The vile, duplicitous wretch!

She was suddenly overtaken with the urge to prove herself right. She would not only search for Superman in the air and at emergencies and crime scenes, she would eavesdrop on Lane and Kent until she uncovered their hypocrisy. She would then reveal their perfidy to the world and release Lois from her bondage.

Such an heroic action would, in all probability, result in lifting Superman's respect for her even higher. She envisioned the ecstasy of mating with such a noble specimen of manhood, with the attendant passion and excitement inherent in such a coupling. Their daughter would be the bravest, strongest, most capable Amazon ever born.

Perhaps she could convince the Court of Nine to allow Superman to visit her in the palace following the birth of their daughter. It was a long-standing prohibition that no adult male might stand upon Themyscira and live — a law nowadays more honored in the breach than in the observance — but surely as queen and mother of such a splendid child, she could make certain that the law would be amended for herself and her mate.

Perhaps he might even decide to live there with them. Yes, that would be splendid! She would not only be queen and able to raise her daughter in the finest traditions of the Amazons, she would have her mate at her beck and call both day and night. It would truly be Paradise Island for her.

She increased her speed and angled upward, soaring near the limits of her ability. She let out a cry of victory and joy and pushed herself into an aerial acrobatics routine which she'd performed the day before she had left on her quest. This time, however, she flew not for the judges, nor to demonstrate her skill to her mother, but for herself.

News of the derailed tank car carrying a hazardous chemical mixture had come just as Clark and Lois had walked out of the building for lunch. Instead of a meal at Callard's, Lois had stolen a quick kiss from him before running back into the garage to take her new Jeep north to the location where the train had jumped the track. Clark, of course, had sprinted into a nearby alley and flown away as Superman.

When he arrived, he saw that the emergency services seemed to have the situation under control. They had

already established a safety perimeter, had evacuated the nearby subdivision, had locked down the elementary school just half a mile away, and had designated a fire truck to hose down the tank car to keep it cool since the coolant system was damaged in the derailment.

He landed a few feet behind what he assumed was the command post operating out of the back of a pickup truck topped with an oversized camper shell and nearly a dozen antennae. "Excuse me," he said. "It looks to me like you have the situation under control."

One of the officers turned and rolled his eyes at him and spoke in a nasal tone. "Come on, pal, you're the third Superman to drop by today. Why don't you go plug a volcano or something?" He turned back to his paperwork.

Superman lifted his feet to sit cross-legged in midair. "If you really don't need my help, officer, I'll certainly leave. But I'm here if you need me."

A blonde woman in a firefighter's uniform turned and stared. The pinch-faced officer who'd spoken first didn't look at Superman as he said, "Yeah, yeah, we'll take it under advisement."

The woman tugged on the first officer's sleeve. "Frank. Frank! I think you should talk to him."

"Stop pulling on my arm, Margaret! I'm busy."

The woman grabbed his arm and forced him to turn around. "Talk to him, Frank."

Frank opened his mouth to snap at Superman until he noticed that the red boots were not on the ground. "Uh — um — I — I'm sorry. I just — I assumed that — anyway, thanks."

Superman sat in midair and waited. Margaret finally elbowed Frank in the ribs. "What? Oh, right. Superman, what was it you wanted?"

"I wanted to offer my help if you could use it, although I'm not sure you need me right now."

Frank blinked several times and made several inarticulate noises. Margaret sighed in apparent exasperation and shoved him to the side. "Thank you, Superman. The car isn't leaking right now and we've got the temperature down low enough to prevent a pressure leak, but it will take several hours to get a crane large enough to lift the car back in place. Could you help us with that?"

Superman nodded. "Of course. I assume you want it back on the track on its wheels?"

Just then a tall, gangly young man ran up to the gathering. "Sir! The railroad technician just gave me some bad news."

Frank turned to him and snapped. "Can't you see that we're busy? Take it somewhere else!"

Superman put his boots back on the ground and raised his hand. "Wait a moment. What's your name, young man?"

"Wha — uh — name — right! My name's Thomas Reilly, sir. Uh — Superman, sir!"

"Just call me Superman, Mr. Reilly, and we'll be fine. Now what's the bad news?"

"Bad news?"

"Yes. You said the railroad technician just gave you some bad news. What is it?"

"Bad news?" Reilly pinched his forehead in thought for

a moment, then his eyes popped open wide. “Oh! Right. He said that one of the trucks is damaged and they’ll have to replace it.”

Frank put his hands on his hips and huffed, “Don’t bother Superman with something so unimportant! We’ll just have someone drive another truck up here and put the broken one on a tow truck!”

Margaret tapped him on the shoulder. “No, Frank, he’s talking about the trucks on the tank car. The trucks are the assemblies under the car which hold the track wheels in place. Right, Reilly?”

“Yes, ma’am. He said it won’t hold the car’s weight. And they can’t replace it here. They don’t have the right equipment or spare parts. He wants to bring another car in and offload the cargo to it.”

“How long will that take?”

“They can’t get a new car here before dark. Offloading will take six to eight hours because of the position of the overturned car.”

Margaret sighed and looked at Frank. “What do we do now, oh brilliant one?”

Frank frowned. Superman thought it made his face even more ferret-like. “Well, I don’t know! Ask the railroad guy!”

A young woman wearing paramedic gear sprinted up to the group. “The tank’s leaking! We have to get away!”

“What!” shouted Frank. “It wasn’t leaking a minute ago!”

“It is now!” she shouted back. “There’s a crack or something on the underside where it’s resting! That stuff is toxic and I’m out of here!”

She vanished before anyone could ask another question. Superman strode forward. “I’ll see if I can seal the leak, but if I can’t I’ll have to get rid of the whole thing.”

“Thank you, Superman,” Margaret said.

He trotted to the end of the car where a short, white-haired man wearing old-fashioned spectacles directed everyone away from the wreck site. From behind the man, he asked, “Sir! How can I help?”

“You can get your sorry self out of here, you stupid — oh, sorry, Superman, didn’t recognize you at first.”

“Never mind that, how can I help?”

“You can get that blasted thing out of here!”

“Where can I put it?”

“Uh — “ the man shook his head. “You can’t put it in any body of water. The chemicals won’t break down, and they’ll kill everything they touch.”

“What about a secure landfill?”

“There’s not one around that will take that stuff!”

“Can I take it to a yard where they can offload the chemicals?”

“No! It turns into a toxic gas when it’s exposed to air!”

Superman thought furiously for a moment. “Then it has to be eliminated.”

“What? No! You can’t burn it like scrap wood! It’s too volatile — it’d go off like a bomb!”

“I was thinking of putting it in orbit.”

“What? Orbit?” The older man’s mouth dropped open for a moment, then he smiled and nodded. “That’s brilliant! The cold will freeze the chemicals and prevent them from

escaping! Can you do that right now?”

Superman frowned. “I don’t know. It’s not too heavy for me to lift, of course, but I’m worried about the load shifting before I can get it up high enough. And if I freeze it here, the whole car might burst.”

“Then may I offer my assistance?”

The white-haired man and Superman both turned to see Wonder Woman standing behind them. Her body language said that she was poised for action.

“Yes!” said Superman. “Can you help me lift this car into orbit?”

She frowned. “How much does it weigh?”

The white-haired man answered, “Two hundred eighty thousand pounds fully loaded. And right now it’s fully loaded!”

Wonder Woman tilted her head in thought, then said, “I am not certain I could lift it alone, but I can help balance it. I assume we would not be traveling at a great rate of speed?”

“As fast as we can go and keep it under control.”

“Then let us begin.”

Superman turned to the white-haired man — whose name he hadn’t learned — and nodded. “Thank you, sir. You’d better get to safety.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice! Good luck!” With that, he followed the rest of the emergency workers to what they hoped was a safe distance.

“How should we lift this object, Superman?”

“I’ll lift the center. I need you to give me a boost on whichever end is heavier. I don’t think the load is balanced.”

“Would you prefer to seal the breach now or in the air?”

“I’ll freeze it as soon as I get a clear shot at it. You be careful in case this stuff is toxic to you.”

Her eyes widened for a moment, then she nodded. “I will take precautions.”

Talking time was done — it was helping time. Superman gently lifted the far side of the tank car until he saw the crack, a small jagged line almost four feet long. It appeared that the car had been bent and stressed when it had fallen off the track across a small ditch beside the right of way.

He gently applied his cooling breath until the thin fog seeping out disappeared, then he used his heat vision to flash burn all the bits of toxic fog he could see. He sensed, rather than saw, Wonder Woman run to one end of the rail car and slowly lift until the whole car was level.

“Ready to go?” he called.

“I am ready!”

“Lift on the count of three! One — two — three!”

The railroad car slowly rose into the air, carried by the two heroes.

Wonder Woman was ecstatic. This situation could not be more advantageous for her if she had planned it. She hadn’t, of course — putting innocents at risk would have been a blatant and very serious violation of the ancient Amazon warrior code, not to mention it being something that Superman would surely not view in a positive light.

She glanced down at the people on the ground. Most were staring at them as they lifted the car beyond the range

of their limited human vision. Some were shouting and clapping and jumping or dancing in place. And a few made their way through the crowd, asking questions and recording the responses they received.

She recognized Lois Lane speaking to one small group.

The load seemed to shift and she gave her full attention to the matter at hand. The end she was carrying suddenly felt much lighter and she flitted to the far end. “Changing ends!” she called.

“Good. Thought we were going to lose it for a moment.”

They gained speed as they flew higher, and the quality of the light changed. Wonder Woman’s lungs began to labor for oxygen. Apparently she needed more air when she was exerting herself, something she had never done before at this altitude.

“I believe I am — nearing my limit, Superman! Can you — handle this alone now?”

He hesitated, then called out, “It would be better if you could give me another twenty seconds. We’re almost past the stratosphere.”

She blinked. They were higher than she’d first thought. “I will do my best,” she answered.

Twenty seconds. She focused on that and kept lifting.

Nineteen.

Eighteen.

Seventeen.

Sixteen. She felt as if her lungs wouldn’t fill.

Fifteen.

Fourteen.

Thirteen.

Twelve.

Eleven. Her head began to feel light.

Ten.

Nine.

Eight.

Seven.

Six. Her vision grayed out around the edges and she gritted her teeth.

Five. She had to focus.

Four. Focus!

Three —

She felt air rushing past her face and wondered why, then she remembered what had happened in a jarring moment. She tried to alter her flight path and felt arms holding her aloft.

She was in Superman’s arms.

But it wasn’t because he felt tenderness for her. And it wasn’t because he was celebrating. The last count she remembered was — was three.

She hadn’t made it. She’d failed. Not only had she failed to protect the innocents, she’d failed Superman. The shock of sudden shame caused her to stiffen.

His arms tightened ever so slightly beneath her shoulders and knees. “Easy, Wonder Woman. You’re going to be fine.”

She opened her eyes and turned her head to look into his face. To her surprise, he was smiling. “Are you feeling better now?” he asked.

She looked around to see solid cloud cover beneath

them. She took a deep breath and realized that they were at an altitude comfortable for her.

She tried to push herself away, but he held on. “Whoa, now, take it easy. I want to make sure you’re ready to fly before I let you go.”

Another deep breath cleared her mind. “What happened to the railroad car? Did I drop it?”

He chuckled. “No. You held on and lifted for almost thirty seconds more, then you just let go and did a reverse swan dive. It was quite graceful.”

“But the car! The chemicals — “

“They’re in a stable orbit outside satellite height. The car is encased in a block of ice and it will be fine for a few days until the railroad decides what they want to do with it.”

“But — you caught me?”

He smiled. “Of course. I wouldn’t want my assistant to suffer an injury. I caught up to you at about sixty thousand feet and slowed you down until we got to about twenty-five thousand. That’s when your color came back, so I figured you’d be okay.”

She nodded. “I do feel much better now.”

“Are you ready to fly on your own now?”

“I believe so. Please release me.”

He stopped and hovered, then slowly withdrew his support her. She wobbled for a moment, then steadied herself and nodded. “Thank you. I can fly on my own now.”

“You sure?”

She suddenly accelerated away from him, then reversed course and corkscrewed around his position. “Yeah,” he grinned, “I think you’ve recovered nicely.”

She smiled back. “What is our next course of action?”

He shrugged. “I can’t very well tell you what to do, but I’m going back to speak with the railroad people. And I wouldn’t be surprised if there were a few reporters who want to ask both of us some questions.”

“Then I shall accompany you.”

He turned in mid-air as if standing and gestured for her to lead. “After you, madam.”

Her smile grew. “Perhaps we should go together.”

Lois was speaking with the white-haired railroad man — whose name was Sherman Morgan — when Superman and Wonder Woman floated down out of the sky and landed a few yards away.

Everyone turned to look at them, including Mr. Morgan. Lois took the opportunity to release the nervous breath she’d been holding since she’d spotted her husband in the sky. From the look on Superman’s face, it appeared that their joint mission had been successful.

She looked at Wonder Woman and blinked. Her focus was entirely on Superman. And her expression reminded Lois of something — something in her own past —

And then it came to her.

She’d seen that look on another woman’s face before.

Her own.

The look on Wonder Woman’s face matched the one on Lois’ own face in the picture someone had taken when Clark had won his first Kerth.

It hit her like a spinning reverse round kick to the head. Wonder Woman thought she was in love with Superman.

And Superman had to be the ‘suitable male’ they’d written about.

As Superman discussed the particulars of the recovery effort with Mr. Morgan, she examined him carefully. Everything about him said that he’d just helped out at an emergency and the enterprise had ended in a best case scenario. He was conscious of Mr. Morgan’s thanks and made some constructive suggestions on how to recover the chemicals. But to Wonder Woman’s adoring gaze and posture, he was totally oblivious.

Great. Just great. How was she going to tell Clark? And what were they going to do about Wonder Woman?

As if Lois’ life wasn’t complicated enough.

Chapter Seven

They’d filed the story about Superman and Wonder Woman’s joint salvage of the railroad car. They’d met with the other two Daily Planet reporters who’d ended up at the scene and had copied their notes. They’d returned to the office and briefed Perry on the latest Wonder Woman story. And Superman had set up a meeting with the railroad maintenance executives to finalize a plan for recovering the contents of the frozen tank car from orbit.

But Lois hadn’t mentioned Wonder Woman’s worshipful gaze to Clark.

Dinner that night was a quiet affair. Clark kept trying to engage her in small talk, to which Lois responded with single-word grunts. Not until they were washing the dinner dishes did she dare to broach the subject.

She scrubbed a fork and handed it to him. “Here you go. By the way, what do you think of Wonder Woman?”

He stared at her. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see his expression morph from ‘Do what?’ to ‘Oh, I see.’

He wiped the fork dry and put it in the silverware drawer, neatly slipped on the bottom of the stack. “Oh, I don’t know. She did help Superman today.”

“You could have taken care of that tank car by yourself.”

“Yes, I could have, but it would have been far more difficult. And she really did help keep it balanced before I put it in orbit.”

She attacked the butter knives in her hands. “So you’re saying that she contributed materially to the resolution of the situation?”

“Yes, that’s what I’m saying.”

“Well, isn’t that just terrific.”

He turned to face her. “Lois, what’s really wrong? Are you mad at her?”

“No.”

“Are you mad at me?”

She handed him the knives and growled, “No!”

He bit his lower lip and sighed. “There’s something wrong. But that’s all I know. And if I don’t know what I’ve done wrong, I can’t correct it.” He touched her elbow gently. “Please talk to me.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“I think there is.” She didn’t respond, so he added, “Something’s bothering you, honey, and it has something to do with Wonder Woman. I need for you to tell me, because beyond knowing that there’s something wrong, I don’t know what it is. Please tell me.”

She leaned on the edge of the sink and gritted her teeth.

“Fine! She’s in love with you.”

Clark’s rapid blinking told her that her statement had taken him completely by surprise. “She — she what?”

“She thinks she’s in love with you, Clark! You’re the ‘ideal mate’ she’s been looking for!” She snatched the dish towel from her shoulder and angrily dried her hands. “And I can’t say she’s wrong.”

She turned away from him and stepped toward the living room, but a pair of hands placed softly on her shoulders stopped her. “I can say she’s wrong,” he said.

The level of control in her own voice surprised her. “I’ve always thought you were ideal.”

“But only for you, baby, only for you. There has never been anyone else. There will never be anyone else. If I’m ideal for anyone, I’m ideal for you and you alone.” He hesitated as if waiting for her response, then continued, “I’m not ideal for anyone else. No one else can complete me like you do. No one else can be the love of my life.” He stopped for a breath, then said, “You are the only one.”

She tried not to shudder. That low, soft, warm tone of voice always calmed her. She couldn’t count the number of times he’d talked her down from some seeming crisis point in her life using that tone and a gentle touch.

He slowly drew her backwards into his embrace, meeting her halfway. She felt his kiss on the back of her head and another on her neck. She wondered for a moment why she’d let her hair grow out again, then she remembered that Clark liked it long and she wanted to please him.

And she thought she was getting to the age when she needed to sacrifice for the man she loved, even if he never asked her to.

The tears threatened to spill, but she grabbed onto them and refused to release them. He brushed her hair aside again and nuzzled her neck, then said, “There is only one woman in this world for me. There will always be only one woman in this world for me. And I’m washing the dinner dishes with her right now.”

She spun and grabbed him under the arms. His embrace enveloped her and the hot tears pushed past her clenched eyelids.

The thought that Wonder Woman believed that she was in love with him — or, at least, with Superman — stunned Clark. He’d never dreamed that such a thing could happen, that she could be laboring under such a terrible misapprehension. He didn’t want to offend her, of course, but he most desperately didn’t want a repeat of the Mayson Drake situation, with a determined woman chasing him who refused to accept that she had no shot with him. He didn’t know what he’d done to encourage Wonder Woman, but he was certain he’d find out and never do it again.

Most of all, though, he hated that Lois had harbored any doubts about his total commitment to her. The realization stabbed his heart like a spear, and he cast about in his mind for a way to make it up to her.

“Lois?” He tried to lean back to look at her face, but she just gripped him tighter. “Honey, I’m not going anywhere. I promise you, there is no other woman in the world for me.” He kissed her forehead. “No matter how wonderful she thinks she is.”

A chuckle forced its way in between soft sobs. “You’re sure?” she pleaded.

“I’m positive.” He gently tilted her head back. “I love you. I love only you. I am married to you. I will be married to you so long as we both live.” He kissed her softly. “I made that promise five years ago, and I’m not going back on it. For better or worse, remember?”

She almost smiled. “For richer or poorer?”

“Yes. In sickness or in health —

“Until death parts us.” She freed one hand and swiped at her cheeks. “I remember saying those words. And I remember hearing them come from you.”

He looked deep into her eyes. “But do you still believe them?”

Chagrin bent her smile slightly. “Yes. I guess — I guess I just needed to hear them again, that’s all.”

He smiled his best ‘I love you’ smile. “You can hear them any time you want. I’ll put them on television and radio commercials. I’ll skywrite them above the city. I’ll rent a billboard with those words on it once a week for the rest of my life.” His hand brushed her hair back. “I’m sorry that I ever allowed you to doubt my love for you. Whatever I have to do to make sure you know that my love for you is real, I’ll do it.”

Her hands found his face and she whispered, “You’ve done it. I’m convinced.”

“Good.” He folded her into his massively gentle embrace again. “I love you.”

Her hands moved to his back and she gripped him tightly again. “And I love you.”

They stood together, melding their hands to the other’s body, until Lois pulled away and announced that it was time for bed.

And Clark held her close all night, hoping to chase every vestige of doubt away for all eternity.

Diana made the adjustments to her viewer and flipped on the switch. Almost immediately a frown filled the screen.

“You are behind schedule, Princess,” the young woman scolded. “Our timing is predicated on certain developments, and we are in danger of losing our window of opportunity.”

“I know what the schedule is, Cydippe. I am the one who wrote it.”

“Nevertheless, the schedule cannot slip. It must be maintained.”

Diana wanted to reach through the viewer and slap the girl, but she controlled herself with no little effort. “Have no fear. The schedule will be maintained. Have you made contact with Niobe?”

Cydippe frowned even more. “In a manner of speaking, yes. It is difficult to speak with your spiritual advisor at times, and a proposed takeover of the government appears to be one of those times.”

“Of course it is difficult. Were it not, we would not need you to perform the task.”

One of the younger woman’s eyebrows rose. “Very good, Princess. Had I not known that you would attempt to manipulate me, or how skilled you are, I might not have detected it.”

Diana snorted. “Never mind that! What did she say to

you?”

“Many things, none of which may be construed as either an endorsement of our cause or a threat to betray us. I wonder if we were wise to attempt to recruit her?”

“It is too late to ask that question, Cydippe. What other news?”

“Euridyce has given birth to a healthy girl. She has not yet revealed the name, but many believe she will name the girl after either the queen or her mother.”

“Hmph! Yet another blind follower.”

Cydippe shook her head in the negative. “You know Euridyce. Her accomplishments are second to none. She has excelled in everything she has attempted, and had you faltered in the competition last year, she would now be where you are, wearing the man-trap and panting after Superman.”

“I won because I deserved to win!”

“I do not dispute that, Princess. I know of no one who does so. I merely wish to remind you that the margin of difference between you and us is slimmer than you might believe.”

The effrontery! How dare she, a mere commoner, compare herself to one of royal blood! This was too much to bear!

For a moment, Diana wanted to kill the girl using one of the ancient methods. She wanted to break her legs and leave her on the beach as the tide came in and slowly drowned her. She wanted to pull her arms out of their sockets and throw her in a pit with only a single rope as an escape route.

But Diana still needed Cydippe. She was Diana’s agent in the capital, working behind the scenes where Diana could not. And the girl was trusted by many who might not follow Diana’s lead so enthusiastically were Cydippe not totally committed to the cause.

So Diana suppressed her deep fury and merely sighed. “This is not important. I must tell you that I believe I will soon embrace the Man of Steel and conceive his child. I expect to be home within a fortnight.”

Cydippe shook her head again. “That is a slender margin of error, Princess. Are you certain of your time line?”

“Yes. I am certain.”

The girl pressed her lips together. “I am pleased that one of us is so positive. Signing off.”

The viewer went blank before Diana could respond. And just like that, she realized that time was slipping away from her in more ways than just the one.

She had to accelerate her seduction of Superman. It was the only answer, the only option. If she did not carry his child by the fourteenth day, the entire movement might disintegrate. And her heritage would not insulate her from a charge of treason.

She picked up the archaic telephone and called the embassy to inform them that she was ill and would not be in the office the next day.

It was time to discover Superman’s other identity.

Batman nodded to himself. His equipment had intercepted another transmission, and this time he’d been in the Batcave to witness it. Machines which would work without constant supervision or regular substitution were

more than valuable, but human intuition could perform tasks no computer could be programmed to do.

His decryption routines had made some headway on the recorded transmissions, but not enough to read them. This latest message, however, told him much that his most powerful computer could not have discovered.

One point of this transmission had originated in Metropolis as had the rest, but the other point was different by a few degrees. And the tone of the communication seemed different, too, as if two different people were talking. Or, perhaps, that only one party was different. Either way, there was an urgency in this transmission which was lacking in the previous ones.

Decrypting such codes were the province of a computer which could work for days on end without dropping off to sleep or going to the bathroom or getting hungry or cranky or missing a key item because it was sleepy or bored or because it yawned at the wrong time. All it needed was a clever programmer to tell it what to look for.

He reviewed the latest interception and compared it to the parameters he'd already set up. Many more queries and the program would start coming up with false positives and duplicate matches, but it couldn't be helped. This was a task that took as long as it took, and he had the time.

He hoped that Superman felt the same way.

The clock radio woke Lois from a soft, pleasant dream. The DJ talked over the intro to Orleans' "Still The One" as she wiped the sleep from her eyes.

Those eyes finally opened to see her husband's smiling face inches from hers. "Good morning, darling," he purred. "Did you sleep well?"

She touched her lips to his and yawned. "Slept well, just not long enough." She reached over and tapped the snooze button as the guitar break on the song ended. "Is it Friday yet?"

Clark chuckled. "Only Tuesday, I'm afraid."

"Nuts." She took a deep breath. "I demand a recount."

He laughed again and pulled her closer. "I'll see what I can do about speeding up the work week."

"Mmm. Thank you, my love."

"What do you want for breakfast?"

She yawned again and stretched out her arms. "Oh, I think just toast and coffee, and maybe half a cantaloupe will do me today." Her hands sought and found his shoulders. "And I wish I could lie here in your arms, my husband, but nature calls and she won't just leave a message this time."

He laughed once more and sat up, then held out a hand for her. "I'll have breakfast on the table by the time you get out."

"Wait until I get out of the shower, okay? Wouldn't want my coffee to be cold."

"Oh, no, then I'd have to make a new pot."

She smiled and kissed him again, this time with more enthusiasm. "Don't be silly. I'd drink it cold and get you to warm me up."

His smile turned wistful and he touched the side of her face and head. "I'll always be there for you, no matter what you need."

She sighed. "You know, I'd love to pursue that thought

with you, but I have an urgent errand to run." She slipped out of bed and padded to the bathroom. "See you in about ten minutes. I'm not going to wash my hair."

"You could get it cut short again if you wanted to."

She paused in the bathroom doorway and looked back at him. "What would you think if I did get it cut?"

"I'd be thrilled. I would love you even if you were bald, Lois."

She slipped into the bathroom as she smiled and said, "I don't plan to go quite that far any time soon."

Diana flew over the city, looking for what she had come to call in her mind 'Superman situations.' They were the best places to find the Man of Steel, considering that their two meetings had taken place at a gang shootout and a railroad accident. These people were so disorganized, she grumbled silently. It was yet another source of wonder and puzzlement to her that Superman had never attempted to bring order and peace to this society from a position of strength and power, two things he had in abundance.

Perhaps he simply had never considered the problem from her perspective, she mused. Perhaps he only needed her input to realize how much good he could do if he forced these people to live in harmony with each other. Perhaps —

There! A fire in a multi-story building, one with women and children in danger. The fire department was responding quickly, but the fire had spread rapidly in the old building and had cut off the people in the two top floors from the inside stairways. And the ancient fire escapes on the outside were either broken or dangerously decayed.

This was a job for Superman, she thought. And since he had not yet arrived, she would begin the evacuation.

She alighted on the roof beside the access door and felt it to test the heat behind it. Finding it cool to the touch, she pulled it open and stepped to one side in case she'd misread the situation.

A wall of smoke billowed out but quickly thinned. She ran down the steps and began calling for people to follow her. Most did, but a few of the older residents couldn't climb the steep steps, so she carried them up.

With all of the people she could find now safely on the roof, she flashed down to the firefighters below and told them about the rooftop refugees. As they began reorganizing their efforts, she flashed back up to the roof and told them that help was on the way.

Then she ran back down to the top floor to check all of the apartments. The first two locked doors she encountered yielded to her strength, but she found no one inside.

The third locked door, however, revealed three young children and no adults. The children wore only dirty diapers and the eldest appeared to be no more than five.

"Come, children," she ordered, "we must flee to the roof. You are in danger here."

The youngest one sat down on the trash-strewn floor and began wailing.

"Come with me now," she ordered again. "I will take you to safety."

None of them moved toward her. Diana's patience, never her strong suit, gave out, and she snatched up the three of them and ran to the hallway. She checked both

ways for open flames, then sprinted up the steps to the roof, eager to be rid of these filthy, screaming brats.

She stepped closer to one of the calmer women in the group. “These children were alone in one of the apartments. They would not come voluntarily, so I brought them.”

The woman’s nose twitched and she flinched, then she sighed dramatically. “I suppose you want me to take care of them?”

“Only until their parents are located, or until all of you are transported to the ground.”

“Well — oh, all right! I think these are the meth babies. They’ll be better off away from their no-good parents anyway.”

Wonder Woman released them to the woman’s distant embrace and stepped back. The scent of the children’s soiled diapers clung to her like a fog. It was most distasteful.

She shook her head. “Have the firefighters given you any instruction?”

“No. I think nine stories is too high for a ladder or a trampoline. Maybe they’re waiting for Superman.”

Wonder Woman’s face became stern. “We shall wait no longer. I will transport as many as I can to safety.”

The woman nodded. “I suggest starting with the older ones.”

Wonder Woman nodded back. “That is a good suggestion. Please indicate the two most likely to survive the journey.”

The woman’s eyes grew large. “Well — unless you’re planning to throw us down on the ground like so many sacks of potatoes when you land, we all should survive.”

“Then please indicate the two you would take first.”

The woman turned, then pointed. “There. The Goldmans. They’re so sweet. They’re in their eighties, been married for — “

“Very well. Please organize the people as best you can for my return.”

As Wonder Woman landed softly with the Goldmans, Superman landed on the roof beside a woman with three unkempt children around her feet. “Hi,” he said with a smile. “How about a lift?”

The woman smiled back and tried to brush her hair away from her face. “Well! Hello, Superman! It’s about time you got here!”

“I just heard about the fire. We need to get you folks off the roof. Who’s first?”

“Well, your lady friend just took the Goldmans, so how about Mr. Preston and Mrs. Jones?”

“Sounds great. Who are they?”

“Right there. Mr. Preston is the one in the dark blue robe.”

“Thank you. I’ll be right back.”

Between them, the two heroes cleared the roof within two minutes. Superman flashed back into the building to smother as much of the flames as he could, while Wonder Woman lifted a hose higher than the ladder truck could to pour water onto the top floor. The combined efforts of the firefighters and the two heroes put out the flames within twelve minutes.

Wonder Woman stood beside the firefighter’s command post and listened as the fire captain received reports from his people in the building. Apparently the blaze had begun on the eighth floor when an overloaded electrical outlet had shorted out and ignited a pile of loose laundry in one of the units.

Superman touched down beside the command post, on the opposite side from Wonder Woman. “There aren’t any more hot spots, Chief,” he said. “Your men doused the last two just a moment ago.”

The fire chief heaved a sigh of relief. “That’s good. I thought we were going to lose the whole building.”

“Will this structure be repaired,” asked Wonder Woman, “or is it too badly damaged?”

The chief rubbed his chin. “I don’t know yet. May be condemned, may be fixable. Depends on how much insurance the owner has and whether or not he thinks it’s worth it.”

“Who is the owner of the building?” she demanded. “I will make certain that he ensures that these people have a decent place to live!”

The chief shook his head. “That’s not my department, lady. You want legal action, go see the District Attorney. Or one of Metropolis’ many hard-working and conscientious trial lawyers. They’re listed on the front of the phone book.”

Wonder Woman frowned. “You will not assist these people?”

“That ain’t what I said — Hey, Superman, can you explain things to the lady here? I got a job to do.”

“Of course, Chief.” Superman stepped closer. “Wonder Woman, could I have a word with you?”

Her face cleared immediately and she smiled. “Of course, Superman. Of what do you wish to speak?”

He pointed up. “Follow me, please.”

He rose into the air with Wonder Woman at his heels.

He chose a white cumulus cloud at about thirty thousand feet, where they could speak without being overheard or seen. “Is this too high for you?” he asked.

“No,” she replied brightly. “It is an excellent choice.”

He crossed his arms and faced upwind so his cape wouldn’t wrap around his face unexpectedly. “Wonder Woman, I think you may have made some presumptuous assumptions about our relationship.”

She floated almost to arm’s length in front of him. “I do not understand. Please clarify your statement.”

This wasn’t going to be easy, he thought. “I have been told — by someone I trust — that you seem to view me as more than a colleague.”

She tilted her head quizzically. “That is true.”

Now for the dangerous question. “Exactly how do you view me?”

“As you say. More than a colleague.”

“That’s not a very informative response.”

Her gaze softened and she drifted closer. “I apologize. I am not attempting to obfuscate. May I elaborate?”

“Please do.”

She put her hands behind her back and looked down at her feet. She reminded Superman of a teenaged girl trying to work up the courage to flirt with her first crush.

Her eyes rose and she smiled. “I have long believed that the two of us might build a relationship which would transcend that of mere colleagues, and since I have met you I have become convinced of the truth of that belief. Your courage, your nobility, your strength, your selflessness, all combine with your natural abilities to produce a nearly perfect man. You are every woman’s ideal mate, Superman, yet I know that no woman has publicly claimed you.

Therefore I have concluded — “

“How do you know?”

She seemed to be thrown off-guard by the question and the interruption. “Er — how do I know what?”

“How do you know that I’m — an ‘unclaimed blessing’?”

“A what?”

The Kansas slang had taken her off-guard. “Sorry. How do you know that I’m not married?”

She seemed taken aback. “But — you wear no ring! Males in this society wear a ring to proclaim their status as husbands, do they not?”

“Usually. But not always.”

“And what woman would be wed to such a man and not proclaim it throughout the land?”

“A very careful and wise woman.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you saying — are you informing me that you are a married man, Superman?”

“I am informing you that Superman cannot have a public romantic relationship with any woman. It would be too dangerous for both her and for me. A writer of the previous century referred to a wife and children as ‘hostages to fortune,’ and with me that would literally be true. I would have no peace in public, and they would have no life apart from me. They would never be able to appear in public without me there to protect them. Criminals the world over would threaten them in order to apply pressure on me to leave them alone or look the other way.”

“But surely this would not — “

“It’s already happened! Several years ago, a criminal organization threatened my friends with death unless I ignored their activities. We all managed to get through that crisis without anybody getting hurt, but I’ve never forgotten the danger my friends were in simply because they were my friends.” He leaned closer to her and bared his teeth in irritation. “How much more danger would my wife be in? Not to mention any children!”

She floated back, seemingly startled by his outburst. “I’m sorry,” he continued, “but I wanted to make sure you understood my position. Superman cannot and will not have a wife, or even a girlfriend. The danger is too great.”

She took a deep breath and seemed to recover. “I would not suffer the same disadvantages as a normal woman, Superman. You have seen with your own eyes that I am capable of defending myself. I am also able to assist you in emergency situations. And while I am grateful for your assistance at the fire just now, even as are those whom you rescued, the situation was not such that lives would have been lost without your efforts.”

He sighed. “Look, what you’re saying is true, but you can’t build a relationship with me based on your abilities. We’d have to be compatible on a personal level, have to

have some shared experiences, have to get to know each other better. You don’t know what my favorite type of music is, much less my favorite song. And you don’t even know what kinds of books I like to read or what I like to do with what little leisure time I have.” He shook his head. “I’m not saying that it could never happen, but I just don’t think we’re anywhere close to ready for any kind of relationship outside of helping out at emergencies.”

“I see.” Her tone grew tight and her body stiffened. “In that case, perhaps I might be granted a boon from the mighty Superman.”

Oh, boy, he thought, that’s not the response I was hoping for. “If you want a favor from me, all you have to do is ask.”

She knelt in mid-air before him, her head almost level with his. “Then I beg this boon of you. Allow me to prove to you that I am a suitable potential mate. We might then continue this conversation, should your grace permit it.”

She was mocking him. This wasn’t submission, this was a thinly veiled challenge. He had to defuse this before it got out of hand. “I don’t know what you might do to prove your suitability that you haven’t already done — “

“I will find something.”

And before he could respond, she turned and flashed away.

He could have caught her, but he didn’t know what good that might do. And as Clark he had a lunch meeting with Lois and the deputy mayor to discuss the latest upgrade project for Suicide Slum. No way he could miss that.

He sighed and turned to descend. He had intended that his last statement dissuade her from trying to prove anything to him, but instead she’d seemed to take it as a challenge. And he needed a super-powered groupie trying to prove her worth to him like he needed another Lex Luthor to appear on the scene.

Some days it just didn’t pay to get out of bed.

Chapter Eight

By Tuesday evening, the Amazon Princess with aspirations to move even higher had figured out a way to track Superman to his hiding place. She would dress in her most enticing Diana Prince garments and visit one of the night clubs on the west side of the city, entice one of the male patrons to follow her outside, and encourage him to handle her in a rough manner. As soon as she spotted Superman overhead, she would cry out for help against the brute and wait for her super-rescuer to arrive.

Then she would attach the tracker to his cape.

The tracker was a fingernail-sized device which was tuned to the brain waves of the user, and not only would it adhere to any surface it touched, it would conceal itself by taking on the color of the surface to which it was attached. The device was all but invisible, and he would not feel it if it were not touching his skin.

Much like her golden lasso, it was useless to anyone but herself. Since it was completely passive, transmitting no signal but a reflection of her own brainwaves, Superman would not know he carried it until she confronted him as Wonder Woman and revealed her cunning to him. And she would not do that until she had discovered his secret life.

She amused herself by imagining Lois Lane receiving

the world-wide credit for revealing Superman's secret identity. The woman's profession was the correct one for revealing such a secret, and surely she would not refuse to print a story of such magnitude. It would certainly garner for her all of the praises and awards sought by her kind.

All the Princess needed now was a quiet night to put her plan into action.

Superman flew over the city, watching both for crime and for a half-dressed, slightly nutty Amazon Princess. He hadn't wanted to tell Lois all the details of his encounter with Wonder Woman that morning, but she'd sensed that there was more to the story and had cajoled the details from him after dinner.

And she'd surprised him once again. She hadn't flown into a jealous rage, she hadn't thrown objects around the living room, she hadn't threatened to kill or maim or harm Wonder Woman (or, more to the point, him) in any way. She'd simply nodded and said, "Well, now that we know what to watch out for, we can deal with her."

He shook his head once again. Lois was so wonderful, so understanding, so brilliant. He doubted that there was another woman alive who could deal with the weirdness of being his wife. She consistently found ways to show him how much she loved him.

He sensed, rather than saw, another flyer beneath him. He peered through the darkness and saw Wonder Woman arrowing through the sky. She appeared to be on a mission, and he wasn't at all eager to talk to her, so he didn't try to attract her attention — although he was fairly certain she was trying to attract his attention.

If so, he would have none of it.

She disappeared from view not far from the west side club district. That area was nicer than the waterfront, where clubs which were thinly disguised fronts for gangsters, like the Metro Club, still operated, but it was still far from the best area of the city. He wondered for a moment what she was doing there, then he dismissed it from his mind. She was certainly able to take care of herself. He'd be over the west side in forty minutes or so, provided that he wasn't needed elsewhere. Maybe he'd run into her again. Maybe he'd have another chance to tell her that he wasn't interested in her.

Of course, Lois might have been right when she'd told Clark that people like Wonder Woman, who created reality according to their own preferences, didn't react well when corrected.

The man was a boundless fool. With her long dark hair in a single tight braid and a soft, revealing dress clinging to her curves, she had snared her dupe within minutes. Diana had not asked his name, nor had he asked for hers. All he wanted was a sexual encounter with an attractive woman whom he had never met, and when she had agreed to walk outside the club with him he could barely restrain himself from running out the door with her in tow. Had she not reminded him, he would have left the club without paying his bar bill.

As soon as they left the circle of illumination near the entrance, he took off his jacket and draped it over his

shoulder. His other arm crept over Diana's shoulders, and she suppressed her natural revulsion as she leaned closer. The man guided her toward one of the nearby city parks, one which Diana knew was patrolled by Superman.

He spoke of his work as a stockbroker as if he were a financial gladiator. She tried not to roll her eyes as he boasted of his regular workouts in a martial arts studio, and she made the appropriate "ooh" and "ahh" noises when he demonstrated his unimpressive upper body musculature for her. She was sure he could lift heavy iron disks off the ground, sure that his blue belt was fairly earned, and equally sure that he would not last fifteen seconds in a real fight against a knowledgeable opponent.

She managed to tell him nothing about herself, which was not difficult, as his goal was not to learn about her but merely to use her for his own pleasure. Apparently it was a social convention among these people to engage in consensual sex with a person one barely knew, and as long as no one requested payment, the legal structure was powerless against such socially destructive actions. Diana marveled once again that the city had not already imploded from the lawlessness and immorality rampant within it.

They came to a wooden bench and the man invited her to sit. It was nearly time for Superman to fly near, so she smiled and sat beside him.

Then she allowed him to grope her for a few moments. The experience was disgusting, far worse than her most hated childhood chore of cleaning the stables. She tolerated his clumsy assaults as long as she could, then she suddenly cried out, "No! No! Please help me! Get away! Help! Help!"

He apparently thought it was part of a game. "That's it, baby. You make it better for me that way. Yell again!"

Astonished, Diana merely blinked at him as he pulled her to himself again. He was worse than a fool, he was suicidal! The one definite thing she had heard about situations such as this was that the man was supposed to stop if the woman were to refuse his attentions. This imbecile seemed to interpret the word 'No' as encouragement. Each time she tried to push him away, he renewed pawing at her body.

She had become concerned that he might damage her clothing, and she did not want her future mate to see her in such a damaged state. She slipped away from the fool and stood, then pointed to him and commanded, "You will cease your assault at once!"

To her utter amazement and consternation, the man laughed! "Oh, baby, I don't know where you come from, but I hope there are lots more down on the farm!" Then he leaped up and captured her face with his hands and tried to lick her vocal chords.

That decided things. She drew back her hand to deliver a crippling blow to his belly, but suddenly he simply wasn't there any more. She stumbled and caught her balance, then looked up to see Superman hovering five feet off the ground, holding the man inches from his face.

The man was too shocked to speak. All he could do was blubber inarticulately and kick his feet as if he were running a sprint. Superman glared at him and said, "When a lady says 'no,' mister, she means 'no' whether you want her to

mean it or not. You got me?”

“Buh-buh-buh-buh-buh — “

“Get out of here! And next time stop when the lady tells you to! Got it?”

“Buh-buh-buh-buh-buh — “

Superman slowly lowered the man to the ground and released him. His legs did not support his weight, and instead of climbing to his feet he began crawling away without his jacket. She caught the scent of urine and wondered about the source until she saw that the man’s pants were soaked.

Utterly disgusting fool. How was someone such as he allowed to live?

As the terrified stockbroker scrambled away, Superman turned to the woman he’d rescued and asked, “Ma’am, are you okay?”

Diana forced herself to behave as if she were frightened out of her wits. She pushed her voice to a higher than normal register and cried out, “Oh! The brute! I cannot believe what he — he — oh, it is so horrible!”

She dropped her head into her hands and emitted a stifled sob. Instead of moving closer, Superman asked, “Do you want me to call the police? They can pick that guy up in minutes and you can prefer charges against him.”

That was not her plan. “Oh! No — no thank you. I believe he has been punished enough.”

He nodded. “Can you get home by yourself?”

“I — I believe so, yes. Thank you so much, Superman!”

He nodded. Diana was both gratified and chagrined that he kept his eyes on her face, despite her provocative state of dress. “Good. In that case, I have some other — “

He was leaving! He couldn’t leave yet! She had not attached the tracker!

She stumbled as if she were dizzy. “Ah! I think — perhaps I am not well after all.”

He stepped closer and took her arm to steady her. She stumbled again and leaned against his solid shoulder. “Miss, are you sure you’re okay? Should I take you to the hospital?”

Her left hand snaked around him and pressed the tracker in place on the inside of his cape, in the folds near his neck. She shook her head as if clearing herself of cobwebs and stood tall. “No. Thank you, Superman, I feel much better now. I believe I am well enough to return to my home.”

He gave her an odd, appraising look, then stepped back. “If you’re sure you’re okay — “

“I am positive, Superman. Thank you for your kind assistance.”

He nodded and turned his face to the sky, then gently lifted up into the night air. She watched him until he faded from sight, as she imagined an ordinary woman in her position might do. Then she started on her way back to her apartment.

She could feel the tracker in her mind as he flew away. She could determine in what direction he had flown, and she could estimate the distance between them. The accuracy of that estimate would increase in precision as she drew closer to the tracker. She was confident that she could locate Superman anywhere he was, so long as he did not leave the city.

Her gaze fell on the stockbroker’s jacket still draped over the bench. She considered taking it as a souvenir of her time among these insane people, but she realized that she might have to explain where it had come from.

And the last thing she wanted to tell her daughter was that she had deceived the girl’s father so badly.

What a weird encounter, thought Superman. That woman was definitely strange. For a moment, just before he’d intervened, he’d thought she was about to clean that guy’s clock. Yet she’d acted scared after it was all over. And there was something very familiar about her, something he couldn’t quite place.

Then a car alarm began wailing in one of the upscale apartment parking lots in north Metropolis. It was usually a false alarm in that part of town, but he had the time to check it out. Sometimes it wasn’t a false alarm.

The encounter with the strange woman slipped from his mind.

She waited until nearly four o’clock in the morning before beginning her search for her daughter’s father.

Diana flew over the west side, looking down on the upscale club strip where she had selected her patsy. It was like so many things in man’s world — bright and seemingly cheery and noisy, holding out the promise of enjoyment and distraction and release from life’s toil.

But it was a lie. Her encounter with the half-drunken lecherous stockbroker proved it. Men were greedy, selfish, disdainful of women, pleasure seekers with no sense of higher truth or beauty. And their women permitted these horrible men to rule them. She didn’t understand either group.

It was good that she would not live here with her daughter.

Her mind reached out to touch the tracking sensor. There! It was not far from downtown, and it was finally stationary. Apparently Superman had completed his patrol and was now resting.

She flew slowly about two thousand feet above the ground, slowly shrinking the circle as she kept the tracker to her right. The pre-dawn air was clear and almost cool, and she saw the brownstone which seemed to be her target loom out of the darkness beneath her.

She slowly let herself down close to the roof of the building, then slowly circled it once again to make certain of her goal. She could not enter the building and risk awakening Superman, so she merely noted the building number and the name of the street it faced. She would look the address up in the telephone directory, an innovation she’d not known existed before establishing her identity in Greece. And if the occupant’s telephone number was not listed in the directory, she could easily find the owner’s name in the city’s tax records. Her Diana Prince identity would grant her both access and diplomatic immunity should someone take offence.

She should have proceeded in this fashion in the beginning, she thought. It was — what was that phrase she’d learned the previous day? Oh, yes, it was a ‘piece of cook.’ Odd phrase, that.

Superman would be her lover within the week. He could not fail to be impressed by her cunning and resourcefulness. She would succeed in her mission, even if Superman declined the opportunity to be her life-mate.

And if she happened to be in a magnanimous mood at her mother's judgment, Diana might allow her to live free but powerless on one of the narrow peninsulas on Themyscira.

Diana sat at the downtown lunch counter, idly nibbling at her tuna salad sandwich without tasting it. She hadn't really chosen that particular item, she had only pointed at some food item and nodded when asked if she wanted a beverage. The shock from her visit to City Hall remained with her still.

The brownstone housing the tracker on Superman's cape was jointly owned and occupied by Clark Kent and his wife Lois Lane.

Superman's cape had been in the home of two reporters for the Daily Planet. And it had been placed there during the early morning hours, when the law-abiding citizens of Metropolis slumbered in peace.

There were only two possible explanations. Either Superman used a space within the structure for his personal storage, or Clark Kent was also Superman.

She disliked both of those possible explanations.

The first was the less likely of the two. There was no reason for Superman to occupy part of someone else's domicile. It would mean that he would have no real privacy, and he would constantly risk violating the privacy of the owners. No, that was not a reasonable explanation.

But the other alternative was unthinkable.

It would mean that she had snubbed Superman more than once, and had deliberately insulted him at least once. No wonder he had been reluctant to pursue a more personal relationship with her. Never mind that he was married to —

She nearly dropped her spork as the realization struck her. Superman was already married!

This information changed everything. It was against the law for an Amazon to seduce a married man to gain a child, although the law was not enforced as strictly as it once had been. But if anyone were to learn that she had done so, her movement — built as it was on the restoration of the ancient Amazon traditions — would collapse almost immediately. And if she were to conceal that information until after her coronation, her daughter would be permanently disqualified from assuming the throne.

That was a shame not to be borne.

She considered for a moment how difficult it had been for her to maintain two separate identities. She pondered how dreary it would be to live as Diana Prince for the majority of her day and night. She would have, by a wide margin, preferred to forgo her civilian life, except that it was part of the Wonder Woman quest. Still, she did not understand why anyone would desire to live two separate lives. Had the choice been hers alone, she would have chosen to be Wonder Woman all the time.

And she was certain that Superman felt the same way. Surely he had been manipulated in marrying the Lane woman! Surely he would prefer to have a mate who could

more nearly match him in strength and might. Surely he would rather not be married to such a thin, drab little thing who could not live her own life but was forced to write about the lives of others, a mere shadow of a woman who had not given him a child. Surely Superman would grasp at the opportunity to select a more suitable mate.

But how could Diana help him make that choice, even when it was so obvious to everyone? She could not conceive of a man who chose to remain married to a woman who could not conceive his child.

The pun amused her for a moment, then she returned to her pondering. It was indeed a knotty conundrum.

Then she had a thought. There was one way to avoid that problem. She would have to coerce her mother into agreeing with her plan, and she would have to be very careful. The law allowed one Amazon to challenge a wife to a contest, the winner of which would win the man. Should the wife prevail, her husband could never again be subject to the challenge, so she had only one opportunity for this plan to work. As with many of the Amazonian traditions, this one had slowly been altered over the centuries from mortal combat to a contest of feminine wiles applied to the husband. Whichever woman could elicit the stronger response from the man would win the contest, and the loser would then be barred from any further contact with him.

But Diana intended for this challenge to be the ancient one, the one which was an individual woman-to-woman combat to the death. No weapons, no assistance, no release save for the final one. But she couldn't depend on Superman's response to her. She had to make certain that Lois Lane did not survive the contest. She had to manipulate her mother into agreeing to the ancient contest without realizing that she would be sending a woman to her death.

Diana had no illusions about the outcome. Lois would have no chance whatsoever against Wonder Woman. Diana was certain that Lois would never be able to survive combat with her. She could almost taste Superman's lips on hers — after a suitable three-day mourning period, of course.

Tonight she would contact the queen and set the required events in motion.

Their working lunch finished, Lois guided the Jeep into her parking space and shut off the ignition. Instead of opening the door, she turned to her husband and asked, "Do you have any ideas on dealing with the crazy Amazon?"

He sighed. "Other than repeating to her with increasing emphasis that I have no interest in her, no."

She dropped the keys into her purse. "Me neither. I guess we'll just play this one by ear."

"Oh, right, we never do that, do we?"

A smile creased her lips. "Never." She opened her door and stepped out. "We always make highly detailed plans and timetables and we stick to them like Mussolini's train schedules."

He sighed. "Just once, I'd like to actually do that."

"Are you saying that I messed up your plans last week?"

He smiled and leaned over the driver's seat to kiss her. "Absolutely not. My comment was aimed at our dealings with our many opponents."

“Good. Shall we get back to work now?”

“If we must.” He pushed his door shut and walked around the Jeep to hold her hand. “I was out when you got back last night, and you were asleep when I finally got home. How was your session with Lin?”

“Very good. We’re going to wow them Friday night.”

“Well, I hope so. I’m married to an outstanding martial artist.”

She flashed him a coy smile. “Don’t you mean ‘marital’ artist?”

He kissed her quickly. “Both, actually. And I promise to be there and to cheer you on.”

“As long as you —”

“I know, I know! I won’t try to rescue you.”

Diana flicked on the viewer a full minute early. She knew she must not appear to be too eager to speak with her mother, but she could wait no longer. This communication might be the most important one she had ever undertaken, save for the one she would initiate with Cydippe once the queen had agreed to the contest.

Precisely at the appointed time, Hippolyta’s image came into focus on the monitor. “Greetings, daughter,” she said. “It is good to hear from you.”

“I am also pleased, Mother. There is a matter I must discuss with you.”

“Oh? What matter is that?”

Diana took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I have met Superman and spoken with him concerning a relationship between us. But there is a problem.”

The queen’s head tilted to one side. “A problem? Please explain, my daughter.”

Here it was. She had to phrase this just so. “I was not aware until today that Superman has already taken a wife.”

Hippolyta flinched and her eyes flew open. “A wife? Truly, he has done this?”

“Yes. This is not common knowledge among the people here. He has explained to me his reasoning for keeping this relationship a secret, and I agree with it.”

“I see. Would you then, please, explain to me why the Man of Steel would take a wife and not make his relationship with her public?”

Another verbal land mine loomed, and she hoped she had chosen her words with sufficient care. “It is primarily for her safety. Were their relationship to become public, she, her family, and her friends would become targets for evildoers who would seek to influence Superman by threatening his loved ones. He does not wish to expose her to such danger.”

“I see.” Hippolyta sat back in apparent thought, and Diana gritted her teeth with the effort to remain calm. She could not allow her mother to detect her apprehension.

The queen gestured to someone out of the viewer’s frame, and Diana recognized Chancellor Phillipus’ profile as she bent to first listen to, then answer, the queen. This went on for more than two minutes as Diana nearly burst with the effort to remain patient.

Finally the queen leaned close to the viewer once more. “Diana, we believe that you should return home at this time. We cannot damage a marriage in the outside world, even for

the heir to the throne. And due to the circumstances, there can be no dishonor which might accrue to you. None of us possessed the necessary information. You have behaved honorably.”

“I understand your position, Mother, but I have an alternate suggestion.”

Hippolyta shook her head. “I cannot imagine what that might be.”

“Then please allow me to explain myself.”

The queen hesitated, looked out of frame again, then turned back to her daughter and nodded. “We will hear your alternate suggestion.”

Diana was past the land mines and treading lightly on fragile glass covering acid and high explosives. One misstep at this point would put her and many of her co-conspirators in deadly danger.

She licked her lips and leaned closer. “I propose the Challenge of the Wiles between myself and the wife of Superman.”

Diana was rewarded with the most severely stunned expression she had ever seen on her mother’s face. The queen’s jaw dropped open and she blinked rapidly for a moment. Diana heard more than one gasp from outside the viewer’s range.

The queen opened her mouth and coughed, then shook her head and regained her poise. “Daughter, are you serious? This woman is not an Amazon and is not subject to our laws! Such a contest for her man’s affection is surely not something she would willingly enter into.”

“I believe that I can convince her to accept the challenge, Mother.”

“Be that as it may, such a course of action is most dangerous! What might the outside world say if this became public? Superman is an international hero — which, I remind you, was one of the reasons you chose to pursue a relationship with him. Were we to become known as the nation who ended Superman’s marriage, we would have a much more difficult time making alliances with other nations. They would be far less willing to trust us.”

Diana had expected this objection. “That would probably occur, Mother, were Superman to publicly mourn the end of that marriage. But no one knows that he is married. And if he were to announce that he has fathered a child by the Princess of Themyscira, any objections would turn to rejoicing.”

Hippolyta frowned. “I am not certain that your logic is as flawless as you believe it to be, Diana.”

“His wife has not borne him a child for these past five years, Mother. And that is how long they have been wed.”

She let the statement hang in the ether and allowed her mother the queen to work through the reasoning herself. A man whose wife had failed to give him a child, male or female, within three years of the wedding was, according to Amazon tradition, cheated of his heritage. And according to the ancient writings, this was where the Challenge of the Wiles had originated. A woman who could give a man a child when his current wife could not was obviously more attractive to him, and therefore her challenge was considered to be one for the benefit of the tribe.

Now, if the queen would just assume that Diana planned

to present herself to Superman as the more attractive mate, as the Amazons practiced the rite today, instead of challenging Lois Lane to a duel to the death, as Amazonian law still allowed, Diana's plan would go forward as originally conceived.

Hippolyta turned away from the viewer once more. Diana assumed that she was consulting either Chancellor Phillipus or Mnemosyne, the royal historian. After a long and unintelligible whispered conversation, the queen turned back to the viewer. "My daughter, given that Superman's marriage is not public knowledge, and given that his wife has failed to provide issue for him for five years, I, Hippolyta the Queen of Themyscira, allow the Challenge of the Wiles between you and this woman." She turned and listened to another person for a moment, then nodded slowly. "Yes, Clio, this may be published. Diana, when might this contest take place?"

"I will bring Superman's wife to Themyscira within four days. I anticipate that the contest will take place no more than six days from today."

The queen nodded. "Very well." Then she sighed. "I deeply regret the turn these events have taken, my daughter. I hope that you are following the path of light in this matter."

"As do I, Mother. Have you any further questions for me?"

Hippolyta narrowed her eyes as if trying to read Diana's mind through the viewer link, then she shook her head slightly and said, "Not at this time. I assume that we will see you in four days or fewer?"

"You shall, Mother. Peace be with you."

The queen's expression softened at the traditional parting phrase. "And with you, my daughter."

The screen darkened. Diana leaned back in her comfortable chair and let out a huge breath.

The die was now cast. The queen believed that Diana would challenge Lois to what was basically a contest of seduction, that Diana would attempt to convince both Superman and Lois — and, failing that, convince Superman — that Diana was the more suitable mate for the Man of Steel. Once the modern challenge was complete, the victorious woman would depart for a week of bliss with the man who was the object of the challenge, and the loser would go into seclusion in the temple complex for that same week to evaluate her life and her ability to please her man.

But this would not be the modern challenge. This would be the traditional contest, the ancient combat between warrior women, a contest fought to the death.

Diana's path was clear. She would bring Lois Lane to Themyscira and slay her in honorable hand-to-hand battle. She would take Lois' broken body back to Metropolis and tearfully present it to Superman and allow him to bury her with honors.

Then she would offer him all the comfort that she might give him.

A small smile crept onto one side of her face. Now she had to relay this latest development to Cydippe, who would disseminate this information among her followers and prepare the arena for the trial. Perhaps this action, honoring the ancient laws of the Amazons, would be the catalyst to

bring Niobe and her order to their senses. Perhaps now Diana could claim the support of the priestesses. And perhaps her mother would grasp the significance of the shift in the political landscape and simply resign the throne without forcing Diana to resort to further violence.

The most important thing, however, was that Diana become queen, irrespective of the chain of events leading up to the actual event.

Chapter Nine

Euboea's office door slowly opened and she looked up to identify her visitor. She smiled thinly at Cydippe, who did not return the silent greeting. "Good day to you, Cydippe," Euboea drawled. "And what urgent business has brought you so deep into the palace bureaucracy today?"

Cydippe's expression didn't change. "I have a message for you, Captain of the Palace Guard."

"Oh, a royal message, no doubt. From the Royal Princess, I presume?"

"Yes. She bids me to request from you a preparation."

Euboea's eyebrow lifted. "Perhaps this message should be delivered to Epione. A healer such as she would be more qualified to give you a preparation."

"It is not that kind of preparation, Captain."

"Very well. What kind is it?"

Cydippe took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Princess Diana requests that you, Euboea, Captain of the Amazonian Guard, prepare a place for the Challenge of the Wiles between Princess Diana and her opponent."

Euboea nodded. "Very well. Who is the opponent?"

"An outsider."

Euboea's unaffected demeanor vanished like fog in a flame. "What? Diana is challenging an outsider for a man's affection?"

"Yes."

Euboea nearly burst out with an imprecation aimed at the Princess, but at the last moment she bit her tongue. One had to be careful in what one said concerning that person. Diana did not always understand that surprise sometimes wrung words from a woman which she would not have spoken in a calmer moment.

So Euboea paused and took a deep breath of her own. "You do not appear all giddy with excitement over this development."

"On the contrary, Captain, I am overcome with delirium."

The flat declaration almost made Euboea laugh. "Very well. We can use the Isle of Husbands for this contest. There is a suitable venue just outside the village, and since it is not considered part of —"

"No."

"What? What do you mean? Where else might the Challenge of the Wiles be held?"

"The contest must take place on Themyscira."

Euboea frowned. "That is not possible. You know that no man may set foot on our homeland. Despite our beloved Queen's reformist bent, that law has not been altered."

"No, it has not. But this contest will not reduce the Princess to the level of a lover begging for affection from a mere male. This will be the ancient Challenge of the Wiles, Captain. The man's presence is not required."

“What?” Now Euboea was all but undone. She would have leaped to her feet had she not been all but paralyzed by the shock. “You cannot be serious! Hippolyta would never authorize such a contest! Not even for her eldest daughter!”

“Clio is even now publishing the queen’s proclamation. The challenge has been authorized and will take place within seven days. Probably much sooner, if the Princess’ plans unfold as she envisions.”

“But — we cannot prepare the arena so quickly! We are too far along in the preparation for the Feast of the Elders!”

“The princess is aware of this. She has suggested that an area of sandy beach be cleared of rocks and shrubs for use as the combat arena.”

Euboea crossed her muscular arms and glared at Cydippe. “You and your princess have given this a great deal of thought, have you not?”

Cydippe hesitated, then cut her eyes in either direction before lowering her voice and leaning closer. “I will tell you privately, Euboea, that Diana did not plan this contest beforehand. It has become an unfortunate necessity in our endeavor. And I will deny uttering those words should anyone ask me.”

Euboea smiled crookedly. “So the Princess is not infallible in her foresight and endless planning, eh? She has been thwarted, and now she seeks to force her own way.”

Cydippe’s face cleared. “Believe what you will, Captain. Just have the site of the conflict prepared for the arrival of Diana, Princess of Themyscira, within three days. The contest will take place as soon as possible after as she arrives with her opponent.”

With that veiled command, Cydippe turned and strode away. Euboea sat still for a moment, trying to comprehend the twist which had come upon their little conspiracy. She herself would prefer a return to the old ways, it was true, but the behavior and attitudes of the princess did not create in Euboea a sense of peace. Diana was still the spoiled little child of privilege whom Euboea had trained to fight. The girl still refused to allow anyone to thwart her wishes. And it was becoming more and more difficult for Euboea to follow her commands.

Now she had issued the ancient Challenge of the Wiles to the wife of the man she considered her ideal mate. Euboea wondered who the poor fellow was. Rumors had flown about the palace since her departure that she wanted —

Suddenly Euboea remembered who it was that rumor claimed Diana wanted to be her daughter’s father.

And while she knew little for certain about Superman, if half of what was whispered about him were true, he surely would not take it well if Diana were to slay his wife in single combat. Nor would he look kindly upon those who had stood by and allowed it to happen.

Euboea shuddered. She had no choice but to obey, but she had no confidence that this would end well.

That night, Diana lay in bed, thinking.

Worrying.

Frowning.

She tried to identify the cause of her discomfort, and she finally realized that it was the upcoming contest with Lois.

She sincerely regretted that Lois had to die in order to release Superman from his odious obligation to her. She genuinely liked the outsider, despite her low-born heritage and coarse manners. At least Lois was fair and honest, unlike so many others Diana had encountered in Metropolis. She might have made an excellent household servant, even chief of the servant staff.

If only there were another way to —

Diana sat bolt upright. There very well might be another way.

She picked up the phone and dialed a number she’d not called before but which she knew by heart. Tomorrow morning, then, she would make one last attempt to resolve this situation peacefully. She did not desire bloodshed, truly.

Unless there was no other way, of course.

Clark stood near the edge of the Daily Planet’s roof and scanned the surrounding skies. The message on his voicemail had told him to come to the place where he’d interviewed Wonder Woman at nine o’clock because there was more to learn from her.

The part that concerned him was that he was supposed to meet her alone, without Lois. She’d wanted to come with him, but when he’d told her his source wanted to meet him alone, she’d smiled and nodded and told him to come back with a whiz-bang headline.

He hated to deceive Lois, even for something which might be of vital importance.

He took off his glasses and pretended to clean them with the end of his tie as he scanned the skies for a flying woman — there! Coming in from the northeast at high speed, now directly over the Planet and descending, now slowing and touching down with nary a bump.

He smiled to her and nodded. “Very impressive landing, Wonder Woman. You obviously have excellent control of your powers.”

“As do you, Superman.”

His mouth stuck in the open position.

“I will not reveal your secret,” she purred. “In fact, I hope to share many secrets with you in the near future.”

He shook his head. “What did you call me?”

She smiled warmly. “You need not dissemble with me. You are Superman, a great and powerful man who pretends to be Clark Kent when you are not using your great powers for the good of the lesser beings around you.” She stepped closer and spoke in a low, almost sultry tone. “It must be so very difficult to sustain two lives as you do. And it surely is a hard thing to play the meek and mild reporter when evil men are flaunting their works before you. You could do so much more, Superman, if you were not burdened so.”

Clark shook his head. “I don’t know where you got the idea that I’m Superman.”

“You were in the park two nights ago. You saved a woman from a drunken man who was trying to molest her. You said to him, ‘When a lady says “no,” mister, she means “no” whether you want her to mean it or not.’ And I am certain he believed you.”

Clark took a deep breath and let it out slowly. However she’d done it, she’d learned his secret. And it wouldn’t do any good to pretend at this point. “Okay, you know. Now

what?”

She smiled coyly. “Why, it is simple. I wish for us to be wed. I wish to bear your children. I wish to live with you as your wife.”

Clark blinked twice. Then he blinked again. Finally he regained his senses and said, “What?”

She put both hands on his right arm. “I wish for us to be wed, Superman. Together we could fight evil and promote goodness! We could advise the world’s governments as to the best way to maintain peace among the nations, and together we would be strong enough to enforce our counsel.” She leaned even closer and massaged his arm with her fingers. “And we could raise our family together. I promise you that you would never lack — “ she breathed the last word “ — anything.”

Oh, good, thought Clark, the Superman groupie from hell has finally shown up.

He stepped back slowly. “Look, Wonder Woman, I — I’m flattered by your offer, but I’m already married.”

She tilted her head and smiled. “Clark Kent may be married, but Superman is not. I see no reason to refuse me on that basis.”

He lifted his left hand and displayed his wedding ring. “See this? It means I already have a wife. And the laws of this country don’t allow a man to be married to two women at one time.”

“But you are Superman. You are above such petty restrictions. And since Superman did not marry anyone, Superman can be wed to Wonder Woman without fear of repercussion. You need no longer pretend to be someone you are not.”

He gritted his teeth and told himself to be nice. “Look, you don’t understand. Clark Kent is who I really am. Superman is what I do. Superman is not a real person. He’s just the disguise I wear so I can help openly without putting my friends and family in danger.”

“But I would not be in danger! Recall that while I am not impervious to bullets, I am very difficult to hit with one. And with my strength and power of flight and my Lasso of Truth, I would be a tremendous asset to your work.”

“Whoa!” He lifted his hands, palms out, and backed up a step. “You’re not listening to me. I have no interest whatsoever in being married to anyone other than Lois. Not now, not ever! I love her and she loves me and we’re a family.”

Wonder Woman’s voice dropped in pitch and her face turned almost mournful. “She has yet to bear you a child. You have been wed for five years, and you have no issue. Do you not desire a daughter or son to raise, to carry on your name and your work? Do you not long to be a father to your own blood?”

“Of course I do! But if it happens, it’ll happen with Lois! I’m not splitting up with her for you or for anyone else!”

She blinked at him several times as if seeing him in a new light. “You are certain of your decision? You do not wish to give up this — this hiding away as Clark Kent? You do not wish for me to bear you the children which your own wife cannot?”

He took a step forward and clenched his fist before he

realized what he’d done. “Get this straight,” he growled. “I’m married to Lois. I’m going to stay married to Lois as long as we both live, just like I vowed I would. And I’m not interested in any other woman, including you. Now do you understand what I just said or do you want me to repeat it slower using little tiny words?”

Her face hardened. “No. That will not be necessary. I apologize for taking up so much of your valuable time, Superman.”

Before he could respond, she leaped into the air and zipped out of sight. He could have caught up with her and continued to insist that he loved Lois and wasn’t leaving her for anyone, but there didn’t seem to be any point to it.

He headed back down to the newsroom. He debated telling Lois all that had just happened, but decided instead to say that the source hadn’t panned out. There was no sense in giving Lois any more reasons to be upset.

Then a thought struck him.

He thought about how Lana Lang had shied away from any suggestion that he use his powers openly, as if she were somehow afraid of them — or of what his using those powers would do to their relationship. He thought about how Mayson Drake had professed to love Clark but had mistrusted and disdained Superman. And now a super-powered woman claimed to love Superman and wanted him to give up being Clark.

Lois was the only woman he’d ever known who loved both parts of him and accepted the whole without trying to change him.

She was unique in his experience. She had never tried to get him to be more of one and less of the other. She had accepted him as he was, an amalgam of plain old Clark Kent and the spectacular Superman.

And he didn’t think he’d ever told her how much he loved her for it.

That settled it. He’d find a quiet time and tell her about this weird encounter and then tell her how much he loved her for loving all of him, not just one aspect of him. Maybe this would help her get past whatever had been bothering her lately. Maybe she just needed some reassurance from him. He knew that their vacation in France had been exactly what he’d needed at the moment. Now he’d try to return the favor and lift her up.

He certainly hoped that telling her would help.

Diana fumed at herself. It had been a complete waste of time to reason with the Man of Steel. Lois was obviously some kind of witch and had cast some subtle spell over him.

There was no other reasonable explanation for Superman rejecting Diana for a normal woman, an average woman with no special skills, no trace of nobility in her heritage, not even a pleasing personality. Were the two of them to compete for Superman’s affection on anything like an even footing, Lois would fall behind immediately, and without any real effort on Diana’s part.

Superman would not give up Lois on his own. She had ensorcelled him. Therefore, Diana would have to make sure Lois was not around to work her unseemly magic on him. It was the only viable solution.

The original plan would go forward.

On Thursday afternoon, Perry let Clark and Lois off early so she could rest for the next night's exertions. The advertising department had somehow picked up on Lois' hobby — which, for Lois, was almost becoming a second career — and run free advertising for the martial arts tournament, with Lois' participation displayed prominently. The suits considered this a cost-effective measure for the paper. Lois' thoughts on the subject were not relayed to them, upon Perry's insistence.

Master Chou had been reluctant to go along with the free publicity at first, but his grandson Chen had convinced him that it was a boon for the dojo and for Lin's future. Such publicity would bring in more students from all over the city, and perhaps they could finally expand and be able to teach Yi Chi to a much wider audience. The financial reward would be healthy, but the greater reward for the elderly martial arts master would be that his discipline would continue and not die out as others had.

Clark and Chen spent a working dinner Thursday evening at the Kents' brownstone finalizing the sequence of events during the tournament. The owner of one of the local Shaolin studios had requested a block of time for a demonstration of their techniques, and Chen had finally gotten them to agree to a shorter time frame than the one they'd initially requested. Just that day, they'd received confirmation that ninth level black belt Jim Butin, winner of the silver medal in the first World Tae Kwon Do Championships held in Seoul, Korea in 1973 and now a nationally famous instructor, had cleared his schedule and would serve as one of the judges. Chen had confirmed the doctor and two ambulance teams who would be available on-site in case of emergency, and Clark had secured two snack vendors, one for those who preferred native Asian foods and one for those who preferred Metropolis cuisine.

Lois and Lin spent the time eating, talking over their routine, and gossiping about Chen's lack of a love life. Their laughter floating into the dining room reassured the guys that the gals were still friends and that this tournament would be a tremendous success on every level.

Diana folded the day's copy of the Daily Planet and smiled to herself. So Lois fancied herself a martial artist? She would soon learn how weak and unskilled she truly was. No one who performed the arts as part of an 'exhibition' could possibly mount any kind of challenge to an Amazon Warrior Princess.

The best part was that Diana could take Lois from the crowd after the tournament was completed without alarming anyone. One loop of her lasso on Lois' wrist and they could walk outside, find a dark alley, and be on Themyscira before dawn.

And Superman would be hers within another week. She could almost feel the crown on her head already.

Clark and Chen had disagreed on the timing for the demonstration featuring Lin and Lois. "Lin is the best in the dojo and Lois is right behind her. If we start with them, anyone else competing will seem like an afterthought. They should go on last."

"But they're the big draw!" Chen countered. "Those two ladies are amazing! Have you seen them?"

"Lois won't let me. She's afraid I'll try to 'rescue' her."

"Then take my word for it, they're dynamite! That routine will get everyone's blood flowing and put people in the mood for some high-class martial arts. We can put the Shaolin team and their weapons katas on right after them — they're so graceful they look like dancers — and then the Shotokan master can do his demonstrations, then we'll have a short intermission and after that the competitions will start."

"Oh, all right. What time does the whole program start?"

"With all we have scheduled, we'll have to start right at seven or we'll never get through all of it. Say, did you ever get that call back from the mayor to be the Mistress of Ceremonies for the night?"

"What? No! I thought they were going to call you!"

"You're — no, of course you're not kidding. I can't do it, Clark, I've got to be at the front door and oversee admissions and make sure no one tries to bring in any unauthorized weapons. It has to be you."

"Me? I'm no announcer, Chen! I can't do that!"

"You'll have to. There's no one else."

"But I wanted to sit with Lois for the rest of the show! She promised to explain it all to me."

"You'll have to get a late-night recap from her. Come on, big guy, step up and be a man on this one!"

"Oh, all right! I'll do my best."

"You'll be great! In fact, you'll be super!"

"Don't go there, okay?"

It was time to begin the tournament. Clark introduced Master Chou to the crowd, who greeted him with much enthusiasm. He smiled and waved and bowed his thanks.

Next, he introduced Lin Chou and Lois Lane, who would give a demonstration of Yi Chi to the crowd before the actual competition began. The two women stood in the middle of the mat and held hands for a moment, then stepped apart and bowed to each other.

At the same moment they snapped into ready stances, and a second later Lin launched a devastating attack.

Lois dodged and responded. Lin blocked Lois' attack and launched a double kick, one which might have taken down a full-grown horse had either blow connected.

But both missed. Lois was somewhere else, launching kicks of her own.

Clark watched in amazement. He'd seen Lois in action before, and he knew she understood how to fight a real-life fight with multiple opponents. And he knew that she'd earned a brown belt in Tai Kwon Do before they'd ever met.

But what she and Lin were doing now went beyond that by several orders of magnitude. They were moving so quickly that he had to use his special visual abilities to catch everything that was happening. Their arms were blurs as they punched and blocked. Their feet were smears across normal vision as they whipped through the air. And as they dodged and rolled and flipped away, he gained an even higher measure of respect for his wife's physical prowess than he'd ever had before. And they did the whole routine without breaking any boards or bricks, using only

techniques one might use against an unarmed human opponent.

If Lois ever did go into business with Lin as a martial arts instructor, her students would learn from one of the best ever.

When they finished their routine, he stood and applauded like a madman until one of the judges nudged him and pointed to the microphone at the corner of the mat. As he introduced Lin and Lois once again, he couldn't help mentioning that he was married to one of them — and that the audience had seen just one of the reasons he was completely and utterly faithful to her.

The crowd laughed and cheered and clapped even harder as the women scampered to the locker room to change. Clark reminded the people that there were many more very entertaining moments coming up, noted that the Asian food and the Metropolis food vendors were ready to serve them, pointed out the locations of the restrooms, and reminded everyone to stay clear of the mats during the night. He also got a laugh when he told them that a waiver of responsibility for injury was included in the price of admission.

Then he introduced the next attraction, a weapons demonstration by the Shaolin team. He hoped Lois could watch at least part of it with him.

Diana gave her money for both her ticket and her program to a tall, young Asian man who momentarily reminded her of Clark Kent. She glanced at the program to find the demonstration Lois was performing, only to see that she had just missed it.

She sighed. Assisting the police at that liquor store robbery had not been totally necessary, but it did give her yet another good deed in the ledger which would further convince the people of the city that she was here to help them. And, upon reflection, she thought that taking Lois from the building earlier rather than later would give her a head start on any pursuit which Superman might mount.

A familiar voice rang out over the speakers in the hall, and she realized that Clark was announcing the next demonstration. She glanced at the open floor to see two fairly agile men swinging swords at each other. As she glanced around, she realized that every eye was focused on them.

She didn't see Lois, so she assumed that her target had already moved to the changing area. Diana slipped behind the excited observers and headed toward the locker rooms, hoping that her quarry was the only one there.

Luck! Lois was seated on a wooden bench in front of a row of lockers, wearing a loose outfit that resembled long-sleeved pajamas. All Diana needed to do would be to step closer and loop her lasso over Lois' wrist, and then the woman would obey her every command.

Lois looked up as Diana approached. "I'm sorry," Lois said, "but the locker room is closed to the public. Only participants are supposed to be back here."

"That is all right, Lois," Diana purred, "I came to see you."

Lois pointed at her. "Me? Wait a minute, I know you. You're that woman from the Greek Embassy — um — "

The lasso looped over Lois' outstretched hand as if it had been made to order. "Yes, I am Diana Prince."

Lois looked at her wrist with alarm, but a soft "No" from Diana stopped her from stripping off the lasso. "Stand up, please, Lois," Diana continued, "and come with me. We need to have a conversation."

Just then a toilet flushed, and another woman wearing slacks and a blouse walked around a wall. "Are you changed yet, Lois? We have time to — " and then she saw Diana.

Do not fight her, thought the princess, just get out quickly. "Everything is fine, madam. Lois and I were simply going to share a cup of coffee. I came back here to find her before I lost her again in the crowd."

The short Asian woman frowned and looked at Lois, who showed a placid expression and a relaxed stance. Diana sent a quick impulse to agree with her down the lasso.

"That's right, Lin," said Lois in a flat tone. "We're just going to share a cup of coffee."

Lin paused, then said, "Okay. Chen and I will be waiting for you in the stands. And I think your husband may have missed his calling. He's a terrific announcer."

"It is kind of you to say that. Is it not kind, Lois?"

Another quick jolt. "Yes, of course. It is kind of you, Lin."

Lin nodded slowly and walked past the two women. "It's just the truth. Hey, don't forget, my grandfather wants to introduce the two of us again right after the intermission. He won't say so, but he's really proud of what we've done together."

Yet another jolt. "I won't forget, Lin."

"Okay," she called as she left the locker room. "See you in a few."

Diana watched the Asian woman leave, then turned to Lois. "Is there another exit to this building, one we may use without being observed?"

"Yes. The fire exit is behind the women's bathroom."

"Fire exit? Does that door have an alarm attached to it?"

Lois frowned slightly. "Yes."

"Then we cannot use it. Where is an exit we can use to leave the building without being seen and without alerting the others to our presence here?"

Lois' lips trembled with the effort to resist. Despite the circumstances, Diana was impressed. Very few Amazons could hold back information under the pressure of the lasso, yet this outsider might prove to be stronger than any of Diana's sisters in this one area.

But she could not hold out much longer. Her breath burst out all at once. "There's an exit behind the main entrance that opens out into the parking lot. But it's not well-lit and nobody's watching it."

"Very well. We will use that exit."

With Lois in the lead and Diana close enough to hide the lasso up her jacket's long sleeve, they walked unnoticed out the side exit.

When they were out in the parking lot, Lois slowly turned her head around and said, "You're Wonder Woman."

"Yes, I am. And I must compliment you on your mental strength. No one else in the city has been able to resist my lasso as you have."

They took a few more steps, then Lois asked, “Why are you doing this?”

“Ah,” Diana said, “that is a question we will answer later. Right now, I fear you must go to sleep.”

Before Lois could face front again, a woman materialized out of the darkness and pressed a device to Lois’ shoulder. The device hissed for a moment and Lois crumpled into Diana’s arms.

“I presume you mixed the potion properly, Cydippe?”

“If not,” growled the newcomer, “you may blame Epione and her healer’s texts.”

“As you say. Where is our transportation?”

Cydippe pointed. “We will ride in that vehicle, the yellow one with the crude light on top. The driver has been paid not to care who rides in his odiferous chariot. Ten minutes travel time to the aircraft and we will take off. Ismene will pilot us to Themyscira.”

“Ismene? Has she finally mastered the controls of that craft? How many times did she damage the simulator?”

“Do not allow her to hear your doubts, Princess. She is the only qualified pilot I could find on such short notice, and she is not happy about participating in this hastily planned endeavor.”

“Then let us depart this cesspool of man, Cydippe. Destiny awaits us.”

Jimmy hated to work late. He especially hated to work late tonight of all nights, when Lois was performing her Yi Chi demo with Lin Chou. He’d often thought about taking up martial arts again, although his preferred style was Aikido and not Yi Chi. Maybe Master Chou could recommend a good Aikido instructor — or, on second thought, maybe not. It didn’t seem like it would be good form to ask one teacher to recommend a teacher in another discipline to —

What was that?

He looked around the empty newsroom and saw nothing. Yet he was sure he’d seen something out of the corner of his eye, had heard the whisper of soft footfalls on the floor. But the lights were on full and there was no place for anyone to hide.

But what was that thick brown envelope on Lois’ desk? He was certain it hadn’t been there five minutes before.

He glanced around again and slowly crept toward her desk. When he got close enough, he read the label: Lois Lane, Daily Planet.

No return address, no postage, so it hadn’t come from outside the office, and not through the postal system. He wondered where it —

Then he saw the tiny symbol in the lower right corner of the package front.

It was a bat.

He whipped his head around and thought he saw movement near the stairwell, a flutter of soft darkness passing through the doorway. His heart raced and he crouched down with his fists at the ready. If the legendary Batman were here, Jimmy would make sure he stayed.

But a few moments later, sanity returned. If the Batman had indeed left this package for Lois, she’d need it right away. And since his current duties included making sure

that the reporters had what they needed when they needed it — whether they knew they needed it or not — he decided he had to take this package to Lois immediately. Otherwise she might not get it until Monday morning, and the information might be out of date by then.

He paused long enough to call the night editor and tell him where he was going and why, then he cautiously lifted the package and made his way to the elevator as quickly as was reasonable.

Somehow he was sure this was something really important.

Chapter Ten

Jimmy shook hands with Chen Chou at the front door.

“Hey, man, how’s it going?”

Chen laughed aloud. “Are you kidding? We’re sold out! We even opened up the upstairs viewing area for standing room only, and I just hope the city fire marshal doesn’t see how many people we’ve packed in there! This place is nuts tonight!”

“That’s great, Chen. Hey, do you know where Lois is?”

“Lois? Sorry, haven’t seen her since she and Lin wowed ‘em at the beginning. Dude, you should have been here! You wouldn’t believe how loud it was in here when they finished!”

“Okay. I have to give something to her. Can I just go on in?”

Chen held up his hand and assumed a fierce expression. “No tickee, no watchee!”

“What? C’mon, Chen, I just — “

Chen laughed again. “Oh, I’m just kidding, go on in! Just a little Asian-American humor.”

“Right. Catch you later!”

Jimmy pushed through the mass of people looking for Lois or Clark or Lin or Master Chou. But his attention was captured for a moment by the two little girls performing a judo exhibition on the floor. The crowd cheered them on as they flowed from one hold to another and then to yet another, quick as cats yet firm as their parents’ curfews. It was impressive.

But when they finished the routine and the applause burst out, Jimmy remembered the package in his hand. He looked around again for anyone who could guide him to her, and then he heard Clark’s voice announce that they would have a fifteen-minute intermission followed by a resumption of the festivities.

As Clark headed for the sideline, Jimmy tried to intercept him but couldn’t get through the crowd. “CK!” he called. “Hey, CK! Got a package for your missus!”

Clark altered his course and made straight for Jimmy. When he’d plowed through the last knot of spectators, Jimmy asked, “Hey, CK, where’s Lois?”

“I haven’t seen her since she and Lin finished their exhibition.”

“What? I thought she’d be as close to you as she could get.”

Clark sighed. “So did I, Jim.”

Lin chose that moment to tug on Clark’s elbow. “Clark, have you seen Lois?”

Jimmy could see alarm growing in his friend’s face. “No!” Clark barked out. “I thought she was with you!”

“No. I haven’t seen her since she went to get coffee with her friend.”

“What?” cried Clark. “What friend? Where? What did this friend look like?”

“Um — I’m not sure — “

“Lin!” he growled. “You have to describe her!”

Lin moved back half a step and closed her eyes, then said, “The woman wore a dark blue business suit with long sleeves. Dark glasses, even inside the locker room. She was almost as tall as you and her hair was shoulder-length and dark. She spoke oddly — she used no contractions, as if English wasn’t her first language.”

Clark clenched his teeth. “I think I know who that was. Do you know where they went?”

“No,” said Lin. “The woman said they were going to get — no, to share a cup of coffee. Lois agreed and said they were going to get a cup of coffee.” Lin’s eyes flew open. “But her chi was all wrong! Oh, I’m so stupid! I should have seen it right away! I don’t know how, but Lois was forced to say those things, forced to go with that woman! I’m sure of it! Oh, Clark, I’m so sorry!”

“Never mind that! We have to find them now!”

Jimmy held out the package he still held. “Maybe this will help.”

“What? No, Jim, we need information about where Lois — “

“It’s from Batman.”

Jimmy had never seen anyone stop talking so quickly, nor had he ever seen anyone open an envelope so fast. “Documents, two — no, three computer printouts, two CDs, and a note to Lois.” Clark turned to his friend. “Where’s the closest computer?”

“Uh, probably my place. I just finished the hardware upgrade last — “

“Let’s go!” He grabbed Jimmy and pushed him toward the main entrance.

“I’ll take care of the announcing, Clark!” Lin called to him. “You just find Lois!”

Jimmy looked at Clark’s eyes. Whoever had taken Lois was going to regret it.

Lois’ eyes slowly fluttered open and promptly slammed shut. Clark had left the window open again and the sun was streaming down into her face. And apparently she’d slept wrong — she couldn’t bring either hand up to shield her face from the light.

Which was shifting. Odd, she thought, I don’t remember ordering that.

Her hearing returned with a whoosh. The sound she heard was unlike any other in her experience. It was almost like the sound of water rushing past a fast-moving submarine, except they were in the air. At least, that’s what she assumed because of the light in her face. The sun didn’t usually shine under water, and most submarines didn’t have windows.

She tried opening her eyes again, and this time they stayed open. A woman Lois didn’t recognize looked at her with a disinterested expression. Then the woman said, “Princess.”

Lois sensed movement above her head, then the woman

she’d seen in the locker room after the match appeared in her field of vision.

The match! The locker room! This was Wonder Woman! And she’d kidnapped Lois!

That sounded stupid even in her head.

Then Wonder Woman smiled and said, “Welcome back to the land of the aware, Lois. Ordinarily we would have landed by this time, but we had to make a detour around one of your naval armadas. I have been told that this aircraft has the radar cross-section of a hummingbird, whatever that means, but since no hummingbird can travel at this speed, we could not risk being detected. Fear not, we will arrive soon.”

Lois tried to speak but her vocal cords refused to work. Wonder Woman turned to her companion and said, “Release her, Cydippe, and give her some water.”

With the same flat tone, Cydippe replied, “At once, Princess.”

Lois wasn’t up to her usual mental speed yet, but she didn’t miss the undercurrent of tension between the two. Something screwy was going on, and she was sure she’d find out what it was before too long.

Cydippe reached down and released Lois’ restraints and helped her sit up. The motion of the aircraft wasn’t being transmitted to the area where Lois was. Whatever this thing was, it flew straight and level and smooth.

She accepted the tall flagon of water from the woman and sipped at it. Cydippe nodded approvingly, then Lois tipped it up and cautiously took a larger swallow.

“You have suffered unconsciousness before, I see,” Cydippe said.

Lois cleared her throat. “A few times, yes. Often enough to know not to drink too much too soon.” She took another drink and savored it, then asked, “Can you tell me what’s going on? Why am I here? And did Wonder Woman kidnap me like I think I remember her doing?”

Cydippe’s expression didn’t waver. “All of your questions will be answered shortly, Ms. Lane. Please move to the seat behind you and buckle yourself in.”

“But — “

“I cannot answer any of your questions, Ms. Lane. Nor can I help you.” The woman hesitated, then added, “I am sorry.”

The tiny hint of pity in the young woman’s voice made Lois shiver. Couldn’t help her in what?

“Hang on, CK, let me fire up this puppy.”

“Hurry, Jim!”

“Look, man, the machine has to run through the boot-up sequence — “

“Come on!”

“ — and then it has to load the operating system — “

“Will you step on it!”

“ — and then the auto-loading software has to — “

“Jimmy, I don’t care! Lois is out there somewhere and — “

“HEY! CK, calm down! You can’t help Lois by losing your cool!”

He sighed. “Okay, yeah, you’re right, I’m sorry.”

“Just hand me the CDs and sit over there. As soon as I

have anything at all I'll let you know.”

“Fine! I'll sit.”

“Good. Look, man, I know this is hard for you, but you have to hold on. You go nuts right now and you could wreck everything.”

The aircraft tipped and descended so quickly that they passed below the path of the sun's direct light. As soon as they stopped moving, Wonder Woman leaped out of the craft and ran off into the thinning darkness. Lois couldn't see much from the door of the craft, so she followed Cydippe's silent signal to step down to the ground.

She scanned the horizon for any clue to her location but found none. She turned to her dour escort and asked, “Where are we?”

“You have set foot upon Themyscira, Ms. Lane. To my knowledge, you are the first outsider to do so in more than three centuries.”

“Oh, good, a new experience for a change. Usually my kidnappers just tie me up in a warehouse and threaten me or use me for bait.”

Cydippe's eyebrows dipped in confusion. “Bait for what?”

“Superman, usually, although last year I was held for ransom, and once I was tied up in a bell tower so I could watch some bad guy poison all of Metropolis with toxic snow.”

The Amazon's face came close to shifting into a smile. “You seem to lead an interesting life.”

Lois sighed. “You have no idea.”

Two women suddenly appeared in Lois' field of vision. One was Wonder Woman. The other was tall and muscular and not happy. Lois hoped the woman was not unhappy with her.

Wonder Woman stopped in front of Lois. “Euboea, this is Lois Lane. She is the challenged party.”

Before Lois could ask why she'd been challenged, Euboea made a sharp ‘come-along’ gesture with her hand and turned to walk away. Cydippe gave Lois a nudge and whispered, “Follow her!”

So she did.

Lois caught up with the woman and matched her stride for stride until they came to an ornate gate. “Your quarters are within this fence,” Euboea said. “You may request any nourishment you desire at any time. You may request an appointment with any of our spiritual advisors, also at any time. You may also summon a scribe if you wish.”

“Why would I need a scribe?”

“To record your final wishes, of course.”

Lois' eyes popped and her lungs emptied in a rush. Before she could demand why she'd want to record any ‘final wishes,’ Euboea opened the gate and shoved her inside, then slammed it shut and turned a key to lock it.

Lois finally managed a shuddering breath. Final wishes? Just what kind of idiocy was going on here?

Jimmy slid the CDs into his dual-drive machine and opened the directory on the first one. “CK, I got it! Come take a — oh, okay.”

Clark was at his shoulder with Jimmy's first syllable. He

opened the first document and paged through it so fast that Jimmy couldn't focus on it.

“Hey, man, slow down! You can't — “

“She's on Themyscira.”

Jimmy's mouth opened and he took a breath. “Okay, she's there, but why? And where is it?”

“Don't know yet, but there's a lot more going on with Wonder Woman than she's told anyone. Looks like she's not only next in line for the throne, she's trying to make sure her ascension is sooner than later.”

“What? You mean she's planning some kind of coup?”

“Yes. And the conspiracy seems to involve some of the younger nobles and a few of the women inside the palace itself.” Clark stood and put his hands on his hips. “This is more serious than I thought.”

“Great. Where does Lois fit into all this?”

Clark looked uncomfortable for a moment. “Uh, Jim, we've never actually talked about this, but — well, you need to know this.”

“What do I need to know?”

Clark hesitated, then said, “That I'm Superman. I hope you're not mad that I never actually told you before, but — “

“Oh, that. I know.”

“What? But — you — how?”

Jimmy chuckled. “Man, I thought it was something important. I mean, that's important, but come on! I've known for sure for about three years.”

Clark pursed his lips for a moment, then asked, “How did you figure it out?”

“Oh, come on, CK, I'm not dumb. When I went to Perry to ask him about it, he told me I was right and he all but threatened me with Elvis' ghost if I ever told anyone else.”

“Oh. Um, why didn't you ever say anything to me about it?”

“Because you didn't mention it. Anyway, I figure you've got a right to a few secrets.”

“Thanks, Jim. I appreciate you being so understanding.”

“You're welcome. But how does you being Superman involve Lois and Wonder Woman and all this interesting stuff on my computer?”

Clark frowned. “Because Wonder Woman thinks I'm her ideal mate.”

Jimmy almost laughed. “You mean she — that Wonder Woman thinks — and Lois — “ His face grew serious. “Oh, man! She must have figured out who you were and realized that you and Lois were married! Wow!” He shook his head and leaned forward. “But why did she take Lois? I don't understand that part.”

“Neither do I, at least not yet. Maybe the answer's in one of these other files.”

Lois pushed open the door to the cottage within the fenced area. She'd thought about climbing the fence and running away, but she discarded the notion when she realized that she had no place to go. If this was indeed Themyscira, it was an island nation with no neighbors within swimming distance and no one who'd let her take a boat ride anywhere. So there was no place for her to run.

She looked around the interior and identified several

pieces of furniture apparently designed for sitting, what looked like a writing desk with paper and some kind of stylus, a door to a sleek but almost homey kitchen, another door to a room filled with pillows and blankets, and a bathroom. All in all, not a bad place to spend a few days.

Assuming that's all the time she'd be there.

Suddenly someone knocked on the door. Lois opened it and saw a short, older woman smiling softly at her and carrying a thick folder. "Greetings, Lois Lane of Metropolis. I am Clio, Chief Scribe of Hippolyta, ruler of the Amazon nation. May I enter?"

"Uh — yeah, sure. Come on in."

"Thank you. I hope you had a pleasant journey."

Lois didn't respond. Was this woman here to mess with her mind or what?

Clio said, "I bring you greetings from Her Majesty, Queen Hippolyta. She regrets that matters of state prevented her from welcoming you when you arrived, but she will come to see you as soon as she is able."

Clio smiled warmly. She reminded Lois of Martha Kent in a formal toga.

Clio kept smiling. Lois took a deep breath and asked, "Can you tell me why I'm here?"

The woman's smile faltered. "Excuse me?"

"Why am I here? I mean, one minute I was sitting in the locker room after the match and then I had this lasso on my hand and then I was out in the parking lot and somebody slipped me a Mickey and then I woke up in that plane or helicopter or whatever it was and now I'm here and nobody will tell me why!" She put her hands on her hips and leaned menacingly close to Clio. "Can you please tell me why I'm here?"

Clio's smile was gone. "Are you saying — did you not formally accept the Challenge?"

Lois threw her hands in the air and let them fall. "What challenge? What are you talking about?"

The older woman blinked rapidly several times and her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, no! No, this cannot be! The Challenge was not issued properly! You were taken against your will!" She turned and paced across the small room. "Oh, no, no, no!" Then she stopped in front of Lois and stared at her. "You must come with me immediately!"

Lois drew back. "Not until I know why."

Clio reached out to touch her arm. "Because you have been done a great wrong, young lady, and the queen must set it to right! And you must come with me to repeat what you have told me!"

"Well, that's different. Let's go."

Clark flipped through the other files on the disk, then pulled up the directory on the other CD and began speeding through them. Jimmy shook his head. "Slow down a little, CK. You might miss something."

"No I won't."

"Then you might burn out my system. I'm not sure the monitor's refresh rate is fast enough to —"

"I'm moving at the refresh rate now."

"Okay, but I only have one spare keyboard."

Clark stopped and turned to glare at his friend, then both of them broke out into grins at the same moment. "Sorry,

Jim. I just want to find Lois and bring her home."

"So do I, CK, but if there's one thing you and Lois have taught me, it's to hurry slow enough so you don't miss anything important."

Clark stood and put his hands on his lower back as if stretching it. "Okay, let's summarize what we do know. First, Wonder Woman has taken Lois to Themyscira."

Jimmy opened another window on his computer and began typing. "Got it."

"Wonder Woman considers Superman to be her ideal mate."

"Check."

"There's some mention of a challenge in the notes Batman sent over, but it's not complete. It doesn't say what the challenge is."

"Right. Hey! You know Batman?"

Clark smiled. "Funny, but that's the same thing Lois said. I've only met him once."

"You think you'll ever team up with him? You know, to fight the bad guys?"

"Let's discuss that after we get Lois back, okay?"

"Oh! Sure, CK. Sorry."

"Now let's look at this and try to figure out —"

"You mean you don't know?"

"No, Jim, I don't know."

Jimmy stood and faced Clark. "It's obvious, CK! Wonder Woman is challenging Lois for you! You're the prize for the winner of this contest, whatever it is."

Clark stared at Jimmy for a long moment, then horror swept over his face. "No! I mean, you're right, you've got to be right, it's the logical answer, but no! They can't fight over me! They mustn't! Wonder Woman would kill Lois and —"

The two friends stared at each other for a long moment, then Jimmy all but whispered, "We have to find this place." He turned to the computer. "I'll keep digging here. You go hunt for the island."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Uh — look, Wonder Woman said that the island was cloaked, right?"

"So?"

"So any kind of cloaking that bends EM waves will leave a trace signature you can pick up with your vision thingy."

"My vision thingy?"

"Yes! Look." Jimmy danced around the computer desk and dug into a pile of technical gear. "Here. Take my satellite phone. I'll call you on it if I find anything else in this data."

"That's a good plan. Now where do I look?"

Jimmy stopped for a moment, then his face lit up. "East of Bermuda! Look, this place has to be out of the main shipping lanes, right? But it's not out in the middle of the Pacific 'cause that's too far, and Wonder Woman talked about having contact with other countries nearby. The mid-Atlantic is the logical place to start."

"That makes sense," said Clark. "But I'll have to wait until daylight to start a visual search."

"You will?"

"Even Superman has his limits, Jim."

“Oh. Right. Hey, that means we can both check out the rest of this info.”

Clark lifted the satellite phone and checked the power level indicator. “And we can recharge the battery in this thing, too. It’s just about dead.”

“Whoa.” Jimmy took the phone and looked, then gave Clark a sheepish grin. “Sorry about that. I’ll hook it up to the charger and we’ll get going on those other files. Why don’t you go through the hard copy printouts? You can do that a lot faster than I can.”

“Good idea. I’ll let you know when I have something.”

“And I’ll do the same.”

Clark didn’t answer. Jimmy turned back to the computer with a sense of dread. Whatever this challenge was, it was a serious thing for Wonder Woman. And that meant than Lois was caught up in something truly dangerous.

Chapter Eleven

For such a slight woman, thought Lois, Clio moved fast.

They made their way past two different guards armed with swords and holding what Lois guessed were halberds. Both guards moved as if to stop them, but an imperious gesture from the older woman moved each one aside. Apparently she was someone important.

They entered what Lois assumed was the palace through a side door. Clio stalked up to a large double door flanked by helmeted armed guards. “Announce me to the queen,” she demanded.

“I must apologize, Madam Clio,” said one of the guards. “Her Highness is meeting with Chancellor Phillipus at the moment. She cannot be disturbed.”

Lois could hear Clio’s teeth grinding. “Inform Her Highness that Lois Lane is here with me. If she does not recognize the name, inform her that Lois Lane is the one who has been Challenged by her daughter — except that Lois Lane did not know that she had been challenged, and, in fact, does not yet understand the ramifications of the Challenge.”

The tall guard’s eyes grew wide for an instant, then she bowed slightly and slipped through the doorway on armored cat’s paws. Lois looked at the other guard, who was staring at her in amazement.

After only a few moments, the first guard opened the door and gestured for Lois and Clio to enter. As Lois passed, the guard muttered, “If you attempt to harm the queen in any way, I will slay you.”

Lois glared up at her and said, “I’m not here to hurt anyone. I just want to go home.”

Clio stopped and looked back at the exchange, then gestured for Lois to follow her. The guard slipped back outside the room as Lois turned to look around.

It wasn’t a room. It was a mansion which would put Luthor’s ballroom to shame. It was a basketball arena. It was the Dane’s mead hall from the Beowulf epic tale. It was at least three times as big as the Daily Planet’s news floor and held little in the way of decorations or furniture. And it would have sounded like the inside of an echo chamber if not for the ornate hangings covering most of the walls.

Two women rose as Lois and Clio approached them. One was a brunette of medium height and age, wearing an elaborate toga and a wise and thoughtful expression.

The other one, the tall blonde with the royal manners, had to be the queen. She gathered her robes about her, then she moved toward Lois and said, “Ms. Lane, please forgive me for not greeting you earlier. I am Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. This is our honored chancellor, Phillipus. Have you broken fast yet this day?”

The formal language threw her for a moment, and before she could recover, Clio burst out, “My queen, this woman has come to us under false pretenses!”

Hippolyta’s brows compressed. “Please explain yourself, Clio.”

“Did not your guard inform you?”

The queen shook her head. “I was told only that Lois Lane was outside with you and that it was very important that I see both of you at once. I have now done so. Please explain these ‘false pretenses’ you mentioned.”

The queen’s speech was calm and controlled, but Lois caught the hint of impatience in the last request, the one which was actually an order. Clio answered, “My sincere apologies, Your Highness. The false pretenses I spoke of are not Ms. Lane’s, they are your daughter’s. Ms. Lane was never formally issued the Challenge of the Wiles. She does not understand why she is here, nor does she know what is expected of her.”

Both the queen and the chancellor stopped breathing for a moment. Whatever this challenge was, thought Lois, it was obviously bad form not to let the challenged party know she’d been challenged.

The queen recovered first. She strode to what was obviously her throne and pressed a button on one arm, then spoke. “This is the queen. Find my daughter Diana and bring her to the throne room at once! This is a royal edict and is to be enforced by any and all who see her.”

“At once, Your Highness,” answered a voice from the hidden speaker.

The queen sat down and squeezed her hand into a fist for a long moment, then stood. “Ms. Lane, I offer you my sincerest apologies. I was not aware that you had not accepted the Challenge of the Wiles. You should not have been brought here.”

Lois put her fists on her hips and said, “Just so I know what we’re talking about, what is this challenge anyway?”

Hippolyta turned to the chancellor and made eye contact. Phillipus nodded once and stepped forward. “If I may explain, Ms. Lane?” Lois nodded. “The Challenge of the Wiles is not often issued. It is a contest between a man’s wife and another woman who wishes to take the man from the wife. Each woman presents her case to the man, and he then chooses the one he prefers.”

Lois’ jaw dropped open and stayed that way for almost half a minute. “You mean,” she finally said, “that the queen’s daughter — Wonder Woman — wants my husband? And she’s going to challenge me to a contest? And that contest will be decided by which one of us my husband wants more?” She laughed. “That’s a breeze! That won’t take long, either. Clark will pick me in a heartbeat.”

Hippolyta looked directly into Lois’ eyes. “You think so highly of yourself, then? You believe that you are so much more a woman than my daughter is?”

“That’s not the issue,” Lois said. “I know my husband.

He loves me. He's committed to me. He won't toss me away for any other woman, your daughter included."

The two locked eyes for a long moment, then the queen relaxed and sighed. "I understand your reasoning, Ms. Lane. At any rate, the Challenge was not properly issued and is therefore invalid. I see no reason to allow this contest to take place. I will speak with Diana and she will withdraw her challenge."

"No, Mother, I will not withdraw it."

Hippolyta turned to face her daughter, head high and her comportment perfect. She buried the flash of anger at her daughter Lois had seen in her eyes and betrayed no hint of pique to anyone else in the room. In that moment Lois knew she was in the presence of true royalty.

Diana, however, apparently didn't share Lois' opinion of the queen. She stalked to her mother, put one hand on her hip, and stood with a lazy challenge in her eyes. "You have already authorized the Challenge of the Wiles, my mother," she said. "It must go forward. Not even you, the queen, may put a stop to it."

"You may do so, Diana. And you must! You cannot force this woman to undergo this contest without her consent. It is our law."

"No, Mother, it is not the law, it is our custom. The Challenge of the Wiles may be issued by any woman to any other woman. That is what our ancient law states. The contest will take place this day following the mid-day meal."

The queen's eyes widened in horror. "Ancient law — Diana, you cannot mean that you — that you would challenge her —"

"Yes, my queen, that is exactly what I mean! I challenge Lois Lane to the ancient contest for her husband, according to the ancient rules and the ancient law!"

No one spoke for a long moment. Lois still wasn't sure what was going on, but she was certain that the contest would involve more than just getting Clark to respond to her.

So she decided to ask. "Hey, can someone tell me —" "Silence!" thundered Diana. "You have no standing in this court!"

Lois' eyes narrowed. "Oh, really? I think your tiara's hitched a little too tight, Princess! You issued the challenge to me! You brought me here against my will! You're the one who gave me standing here, and if you want to get out of this with your assets intact you'd better shut up and listen for a change!"

Four women stared at Lois in shock. Apparently no one had yelled at Diana in a long time. "Look, all of you," Lois continued, "I want to talk to the queen and the chancellor without Golden Lasso Girl here. There's got to be a way to resolve this without this stupid challenge."

Diana smirked at her. "You may speak with the queen, her chancellor, her historian, or her personal maid for all that I care. The challenge has been issued. Your acceptance is not required. This contest will take place."

With that, the Amazon Princess turned and flounced out of the throne room.

They all watched her go. Lois turned to Phillipus and asked, "Chancellor, is what she says true? By your law, I

have to go through with this contest?"

Phillipus paled and nodded. "Yes. I fear that she is correct."

Lois shrugged. "Well, there's no problem. We both show up, blow kisses at Clark, he flips her off and hugs me and we all go home. End of contest, right?"

The queen seemed on the verge of tears. "No. I am very sorry, but that is not what will happen."

"What? I don't understand —"

"When I authorized the Challenge of the Wiles, that is indeed what I envisioned taking place. I never for a moment dreamed that Diana would choose the ancient challenge." She turned to Clio and all but begged, "Tell me! Tell me that the queen may forbid such a contest from taking place!"

Clio closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again. "I will, of course, research the ancient texts to be certain, but — no, Your Highness, to my knowledge the queen may not halt a contest which she has already explicitly permitted." She turned to Lois. "I am sorry that you are trapped in this, Ms. Lane."

"Trapped in what? Will somebody please tell me what's so freaking wrong? What's the big deal?"

Hippolyta appeared to steel herself, then turned to Lois and said, "This contest is to the death, Ms. Lane."

"The — the death?" she squeaked.

"Yes."

Lois' mouth opened but nothing came out.

As he flew away from Metropolis over the Atlantic Ocean, Superman hefted the fully charged satellite phone and pressed the redial button. "Jimmy! What else do you have?"

"I found one more piece of data you can use. The transmissions Batman was monitoring look like they were coming from a point about ninety-five miles east of Bermuda and about four degrees of latitude south. But he also included a margin of error of fifty miles in any direction."

"That's an awful lot of water to search."

"I know, but that's the best we have. He did make a note that the cloaking device would probably make the water look like it was a mirror image of itself right at the cloak's boundary, but without actually examining the mechanism and the effect he couldn't be more clear."

Superman pressed his lips together. "That isn't all that helpful."

"Yeah, but the island can't be in the main shipping lanes, so I think it's likely to be close to the equator. I'd start at a point close to Batman's best guess and work a spiral search pattern stretching south and east."

"I still don't like it."

Jimmy sighed. "Neither do I, but I don't have anything better."

Superman hesitated, then said, "I guess that's better than doing nothing."

"One more thing. We don't know how high the structures on the island are or how high the cloak goes, so it's possible you could fly over it at a thousand feet and not see it. And if you're too low, you won't be able to tell real water from the cloak's illusion unless you happen to fly

across the boundary.”

“So what are you telling me?”

“To fly low and slow and be alert for anything that looks hinky.”

The word made Superman smile. “Okay, Jim. I’ll call you back if I find anything — hinky.”

“Same here. Good luck.”

I’ll need it, he thought.

Hippolyta pressed a button on her throne, and after a moment a young woman entered. “Have my daughter Troia brought here at once,” said the queen.

The woman bowed and almost sprinted out of the throne room.

Lois took a deep breath to steady herself. “Okay. I’m supposed to fight Wonder Woman for my husband. When is this supposed to happen?”

“This afternoon,” answered the chancellor. “If she follows the ancient rules, the battle will take place in the main arena. But we are preparing for a national feast day, and the arena cannot be used for such a contest at this time.”

“She will have prepared another place,” put in Clio. “If I recall correctly, any flat, sandy area may be used for this contest.”

“Why do you people still have laws like this on the books?” Lois demanded. “I thought you were supposed to be modern and up-to-date. This is pretty barbaric, and I’m not saying that just because I’m the one who’s about to get clobbered!”

Hippolyta sighed. “Most of us would agree with you if asked that question, Ms. Lane. But wiping out the old laws is not as easy as it might seem. Our homeland is built on traditions which allowed us to survive centuries ago when men would have taken us as slaves and destroyed our way of life.”

“And none of us believed,” said Phillipus, “that the queen’s daughter would issue a challenge to the death. Queen Hippolyta has made it part of her administration to modernize our nation as much as possible without sparking a civil war.”

“Seems to me like you’ve got a rebellion in your own home right now, Queenie!”

Phillipus and Clio were shocked into silence.

Hippolyta’s mouth quirked, and Lois thought she was going to smile.

Just then a younger version of Wonder Woman burst through the door. “Mother!” she called out. “I am here! What can I do for — why, who is this? And what manner of clothing is this? Is it a new fashion?”

Lois looked down and realized that she was still wearing her gi from the tournament the previous night. “My name is Lois Lane and I’m from Metropolis. As for —

“Metropolis! Oh, that is in New Troy in America, is it not?”

“Yes.”

“Then you are not an Amazon?”

“No, I’m not.”

Troia clapped her hands and bounced in place. “Oh, this is wonderful! You must tell me everything you know about your homeland! Please, tell me what you are wearing! Is it a

formal ensemble?”

“It’s a uniform worn by people studying martial arts.”

The girl giggled. “They look like pajamas which are three sizes too large for you.”

The queen spoke sternly. “That is enough, Troia. I have a task for you and Phillipus.”

The chancellor looked startled, but recovered quickly and bowed. “Of course, Your Highness. How may we serve?”

“Ms. Lane must be prepared to fight Diana. She does not —”

“Fight Diana?” the girl burst out. “Mother, she cannot fight my sister! She would have no chance to prevail! She should surrender at once!”

“Ms. Lane has not chosen this combat, Troia. But we must give her every opportunity to prepare. Ms. Lane, please go with the chancellor and my daughter. They will coach you as best they can in the time allowed.”

Lois sighed. “Fine. But can I get something to eat somewhere?”

Phillipus said, “I will make certain that a meal is provided for you, Ms. Lane. Now come, please, and we will do for you all that we can.”

Lois shook her head. “What good will it do? I can’t fight somebody who flies and throws a golden lasso!”

“Diana will have none of those advantages,” the queen said. “I cannot halt this contest, but I promise you, Ms. Lane, that you will meet her on equal terms.”

“Equal terms, huh?” Lois pulled the scrunchie out of her hair and let it fall around her shoulders. “In that case, I want a haircut. I plan to yank her mop out of her scalp by the roots if I can, and I don’t want her to be able to do it to me.”

Troia smiled sideways. “Perhaps you are not as helpless as I assumed, Ms. Lane.”

“Call me Lois, okay? Now where’s breakfast?”

Superman was getting frustrated. Every time he thought he’d found Themyscira, it was a false alarm. Twice he’d called Jimmy for further information, only to be informed that there was no further information. Batman’s data had given them a general starting point, but there simply wasn’t enough there to narrow down the search.

And on this occasion, his special vision was more hindrance than help. When he tried to use it, he saw too many frequencies. The spray from the waves acted like millions of tiny prisms, breaking up the sunlight and masking both the surface of the water and any possible indications of the cloak. It was like being inside a swiftly-rotating kaleidoscope.

The one useful thing Jimmy had told him was that the Amazon Princess and her mother, the queen, did not agree on politics. Part of what Batman had recorded was conjecture, but he believed that Diana and Hippolyta had radically different visions of how the Amazon nation should move into the next century. Diana apparently wanted to revive many of the old traditions, and the queen wanted to open the nation to relations with other countries and open trade talks with them. The traditionalists seemed to be afraid of the idea, while the progressives viewed it as the only realistic next step, even if they apparently preferred to

remain hidden from the outside world.

Had there been time, Superman would have abandoned the spiral search pattern in favor of a satellite-level search for heat, water, and weather anomalies in the area. He would have dived under the surface and searched for any uncharted sea mounts rising up beyond the surface. He would have offered to be an intermediary for any nation wishing to open diplomatic relations with Themyscira.

But he didn't have time for any of that. Lois was missing, and he was afraid that there wasn't much time left before Wonder Woman did something truly stupid.

So he scowled and increased his speed and decreased his altitude, not noticing that he was building a wake behind him caused by the increased air pressure beneath him.

Nor did he notice the wake double itself for a moment at the boundary of the cloak.

Lois didn't know what kind of fruit she'd eaten or what kind of juice she'd drunk, but she felt better than she had in months. She was alert, she was limber, she was agile, and she felt ready to take on two of Wonder Woman.

Troia bowed to her across the exercise area. It was empty, save for Lois, Troia, and Phillipus. "Now I will attempt to show you what my sister will do to you, Ms. Lane."

"Go for it."

The young girl bounced across the yard and threw herself at Lois — but her target wasn't there. Lois rolled to her left and bounced to her feet, just in time to block a series of punches from the younger girl.

The girl's eyes widened and she nodded in approval as she backed away. "You are very quick, Ms. Lane. And I have not seen anyone deflect punches in that manner before. I have not been taught those techniques, and I am certain that Diana does not know them because she would have used them against me."

"Okay," said Lois, "then let's try it again."

Once again Troia charged Lois with fists flailing in all directions. Lois took one glancing punch on her cheekbone but didn't let any other blow connect.

They separated and glared at each other across the sand. "Not bad, Troia," said Lois.

"Please, call me Donna. That will be my name when I go to America to find a father for my daughter. And you are quite skilled also, Ms. Lane."

"Okay. Call me Lois, will you? Let's just be informal here."

"If you wish." With her final word, she leaped at Lois, who grabbed her by the arm and flipped her onto her back on the sand.

The girl jumped up, unhurt but wary. "You have many skills, Lois. That is also not a hold used by Amazon combat instructors. My sister will not be familiar with it."

"Thanks. What else have you got?"

"I will show you." Donna's feet lashed out at Lois, who dodged and blocked as best she could. "I am not as strong as — my sister — but I am just as fast — and you seem to be whuuuggghhh!"

The younger girl's breath came out in a rush. Lois pulled back her fist and waited for Donna to recover from the blow

to her solar plexus.

Phillipus moved forward and raised her hand. "I call a halt!" She knelt beside the young princess. "We will allow Troia a moment to recover."

The girl sat up and tried to breathe normally. She almost succeeded. "You are — very quick, Lois," she wheezed. "And you are — uh — stronger than you look."

"Yeah, well, I'm testing for my next black belt level soon."

Phillipus looked up at her. "That is a good thing, is it not?"

"Well, yeah, it is. It means I'm pretty high up on the learning curve."

The chancellor frowned as if digesting Lois' comment, then nodded. "Then it is possible that the Princess will not slay you so easily."

"Slay?" Donna tried to jump to her feet but didn't quite make it. "Ow! No one said — said that to me!" She managed to stand almost upright. "Lois! Is it true that my sister will fight you to the death?"

"Well — yeah, that's what everyone keeps telling me."

"No!" Donna waved her hands in front of herself and backed away. "No! I did not know this! I cannot help you to slay Diana! Please do not ask this of me!"

"I'm sorry, Donna, I thought you knew."

"Troia, your mother the queen has asked this of you. You must —"

"No! I cannot help Lois slay my sister! Surely my mother knows this!"

"Princess Troia! The queen has commanded —
"No."

Lois' soft word caught their attention. "But she must continue," Phillipus insisted. "It is the queen's command! She must obey! She has no choice!"

Lois shook her head. "I can't ask her to help someone else kill her sister. I know how I'd feel if somebody put me in that position, and no matter what Lucy might have done, I couldn't be a party to her death." She walked to Donna and put a hand on her shoulder. "Look, you don't have to do or say anything else. I won't tell anyone if you can't help me. Believe me, I understand."

Donna looked at her with tear-filled eyes. "You — you understand? Truly?"

Lois smiled softly. "Yes. I understand truly."

The girl grabbed her around the waist and hugged her, then broke away. "I — I am sorry! My sister — I do not understand any of this! Why does she wish to slay you?"

"She wants my husband for herself. She's fighting me in the ancient Challenge of the Wiles."

Donna's eyes almost fell off her face. "What? She — But she — That arrogant, selfish, self-centered — oh! I am not permitted the words I require to describe her at this moment!"

Despite her predicament, Lois laughed aloud. "That's the spirit, Donna! I think you'll make a fine Amazon princess when you're old enough!"

Donna smiled through her tears. "Thank you, Lois. You are indeed gracious and kind."

"Tell that to my boss some time. I don't think he believes it when I say it."

They shared a chuckle, then Donna leaned closer. “Lois? May I give you one piece of advice?”

“Sure.”

She hesitated, then said, “My sister is very good at grasping and throwing her opponents, perhaps nearly as skilled as you, but she depends a great deal on using her opponents’ clothing as a grappling point. The ancient challenge — I assume that is what this is?”

“That’s what they tell me.”

Donna nodded. “Then — I advise you to face her nature-clad. It is your right. That way, she will have to grasp your limbs in order to hold you, and despite her strength, her hands are small for her size. It will give you an advantage.”

Lois frowned. “What’s nature-clad? What’s that mean?”

“It means that you would face her wearing only your skin. And if you claim that right, she must also face you nature-clad. I believe it would give you a slight advantage.”

Lois’ eyebrows rose. “Only — you mean I should fight her naked?”

Donna blushed slightly and nodded. “Yes. And my sister does not like to show her dimples, so this will doubly disconcert her.”

“Dimples?” Lois smirked. “You mean that your sister has dimples on her — on her — “

“More than one,” giggled Donna. “My mother used to tell her how cute they were.”

Lois laughed aloud. “You know, seeing those cute dimples might make getting down to my skin worthwhile.”

Phillipus stepped closer. “I believe that you have fulfilled your mother’s instructions, young Princess Troia. Thank you for your service to Ms. Lane and to your sisters.”

Donna stepped back and bowed to the chancellor, then to Lois. “I offer my service freely, my ladies. I wish you both clear skies and smooth water.” She turned and walked away, but not before glancing over her shoulder at Lois with a forlorn look on her face.

“She’s a good girl, Chancellor,” said Lois. “She’s not going to get into any trouble over this, is she?”

“I will make certain that she does not. And I must confess that I am amazed at you, Ms. Lane. You face mortal combat this day, yet you are concerned for the feelings and the situation of a young girl you have met but once. Are all outsiders as compassionate as you?”

Lois shook her head. “No. But I think I’ve picked up a lot of my husband’s compassion. I wasn’t always like this.”

“Yet now you are most compassionate. And it does you much credit.” Phillipus put her hand in Lois’ elbow. “Come. We will locate a hairdresser and trim your lovely hair. I would be most disappointed were Diana to rip your mop from your scalp by the roots.”

Lois laughed and followed her. Too bad, she thought, that her stay on the island was supposed to be a brief one. This could have been the start of a beautiful friendship.

But as she walked, she remembered her recent musings on her relationship with Clark. Was she really going to fight Wonder Woman to the death for him? Would it hurt much when she died? And would Clark, in the long run, accept the Princess as a suitable mate? Wasn’t this the thing she had both feared and expected for so long?

Her eyes narrowed and she clenched her teeth as the answer came to her.

The answer was No.

She might die. She might lose Clark to Wonder Woman. She might carry on the Lane women’s legacy of shattered relationships. These next few hours might be the last ones of her life.

But she wouldn’t go down easy and she wouldn’t quit. She refused to give up Clark to that — that breast-augmented egomaniac. She would not passively accept any fate anyone else tried to force on her.

Lois Lane was a fighter. And she was going to fight as long as she breathed.

Chapter Twelve

Jimmy shook his head as he put the phone down. Never in his wildest dreams had he envisioned getting a call from this particular person. But then, he’d never thought much about how technically proficient the man had to be, with all those neat tools he had in his cave. How does he keep them dry? he wondered.

Then he shook off the random thought and dialed the satellite phone again.

“What now?”

“I just got a call from Batman.”

The ‘whoosh’ of air past the phone suddenly halted. “What did he say?”

“Now look, first off I need to tell you that I had no idea he’d planted a tracer program in those CDs. As soon as we fired them up, he could track everything we were doing.”

“I don’t care! What did he say?”

Jimmy sighed. He should have known that CK would be a bit testy. “He said that he’s listening in on our conversations and he’s tracking you by your transmission signal. He thinks you’re about ten to twelve miles south-south-east of Themyscira.”

“Ten to twelve miles, you said?”

“Yes. He suggested that you continue flying low, but to watch your wake as well as your surroundings. That rooster tail you’re kicking up may show you the edge of the cloak.”

He could hear the smile in his friend’s voice. “That’s great, Jim! Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me, thank the Batman.”

“I will. Next time I see him.”

“I’d do it now, Superman. He’s listening in.”

“Oh. You told me that, didn’t you?” He paused, then said, “Thank you, Batman.”

There was no response from the Dark Knight, not that Jimmy had expected one. “So start searching, Superman! Remember, ten to twelve miles to the north-north-west, and watch behind you on the water.”

“Will do, Jim. The charge is getting low on this phone, so I’ll sign off for now.”

“Roger. Let me know when you find her.”

The voice on the other end hardened. “As soon as she’s safe, I’ll let you know.”

Diana stood tall beneath the shade of a palm tree. Beside her stood her armorer, Pallas, and her closest friend, Mala. They listened as all the women of Themyscira who were not occupied with some vital task made their way to the beach.

Diana wondered for a moment where Cydippe was, then she dismissed the thought. She was, obviously, doing what she was supposed to be doing, working for the cause.

Nearly all of the new arrivals looked at Diana with surprise on their faces. The heralds who had summoned them had said nothing of what was to transpire here today. They only knew that the late summer sun, not long past mid-day, made the bare sand even hotter. Some had had the forethought to bring skins of water or juice, and they would undoubtedly become the most popular women in the crowd very soon.

Mala leaned close to Diana and muttered, “They do not know what is about to happen, do they?”

Pallas grunted. “I do. And I am not happy about it.”

Mala glanced at Pallas in alarm, but Diana only smiled thinly. “Do not trouble yourself, my friend. This will all be over very soon.”

“No, it will not,” answered Pallas.

“Silence!” hissed Mala. “Speak no treason here!”

Her voice too low for any others to hear, Pallas said, “This is an execution, Mala, not a true Amazonian challenge. Many of our sisters who feel as we do will not look kindly upon a future queen who murders a woman for her man. This will not end well, I fear.”

Diana cut her eyes to her armorer. “The ancient laws and customs allow this challenge. I plow no new ground today.”

“Perhaps not, Princess. But the seeds you sow this day are not the ones you placed in your bag to spread on the ground. Naught but pain and heartache and strife will result from this day’s entertainment.”

“You would betray us?” snarled Mala. “Now that we are so close to our goal?”

“It is no betrayal to speak the truth.”

“The truth as you see it, you — “

“The princess should make the outsider her slave!”

“That would be taking a serpent into her bosom!” hissed Mala.

Pallas turned to Diana. “My Princess, showing mercy to this outsider would go far in gaining public support from those who would otherwise condemn you should you slay her.”

Mala growled low in her throat. “Lois Lane would never submit to being a slave! She would conspire to overthrow or even murder the Princess! Now that we have gone this far, that would be the worst possible outcome!”

Diana lifted her hand and smiled. “Silence now, my friends. Look, here is the queen and her party, come for the show.”

Diana listened as the buzz of conversation dropped away until all she could hear was the surf washing onto the beach and the shuffle of sandals on the sand. Her mother, the queen, stopped at the edge of the impromptu arena, flanked by Chancellor Phillipus and chief historian Mnemosyne. Behind them, surrounded by a dozen guards, stood Lois Lane, wearing a light hooded robe over her clothing. The Princess noted that Lois’ robe was simple homespun cloth, while her own was of the finest silk.

Diana nodded to herself as she noted the guards. They were merely window dressing for the modern ceremony, but according to the ancient traditions, they would surround the

fighting ground. Their purpose was to make certain that no aid came to either of the combatants.

Their orders, Diana knew, would be to kill anyone who tried.

But they would not be needed for long. When Pallas had called this an execution, she had not been far off the mark. It was legal, of course, and it was completely within the ancient Amazonian code of laws. The rite had been instituted to prevent intra-tribal conflict over the few males available to them, and according to the historical scrolls Diana had read, the Challenge of the Wiles had been issued fewer than four dozen times over the course of three centuries before falling into disuse. The women of those times had evidently decided that such combats were not the best way to resolve their problems.

But the law, once enacted, had never been eliminated, despite the challenge not having been issued for nearly half a millennia. Diana had read about it long ago and had decided to keep that information in the back of her mind should it ever be to her advantage to issue such a challenge.

She silently congratulated herself on her wisdom and foresight.

All the observers were now silent. The two dozen or so guards — she saw that they were carrying bows as well as spears, which was odd — had encircled the marked-off area and stood at attention. Only the surf and the soft breeze made any sound now. The several thousand Amazons were eerily quiet.

The queen slowly turned her head and gazed about her. After a long moment, she lifted her arms above her head and cried out, “Hear us, Hera! The ancient Challenge of the Wiles has been issued! Two women will enter into combat over a man, and may the better woman survive!”

Gasps and cries of consternation rose up around her. “Silence!” cried the queen. “Women of Themyscira, be silent and listen!”

The noises slowly died away. The queen lowered her arms. “The ancient challenge has been issued. Diana, Princess of Themyscira, has challenged Lois Lane of Metropolis, New Troy, to a trial by combat. The winner will possess the man known as Clark Kent.”

More cries erupted, louder this time. Diana had anticipated that the Amazons would be surprised by the Challenge, but the anger in some of the voices surprised her.

One short older woman stepped onto the fighting grounds. “I am Hellene. I am an artist, not a warrior or a scribe or historian or judge!” The crowd noise subsided. “Yet even I know that an Amazon cannot challenge one who is not an Amazon for a man!” She swung to face Diana. “You! Princess! Are you so weak and lacking in womanhood that you cannot find your own man and you must steal one from an outsider?”

Diana’s nostrils flared. “I would slay you where you stand for that insult, Hellene, had I the opportunity. Perhaps I will come and see you later today.”

“Then you will have the blood of two murders on your hands!”

Mala reached out and grabbed Diana’s elbow. “My princess!” she hissed. “You must control yourself! There will be time enough later to deal with such as she.”

Diana allowed herself to be pulled backwards, and she forced a small smile. “My apologies, Hellene,” she called out. “I spoke out of the anticipation of battle. I meant no threat to you.”

One of Hellene’s companions pulled her out of the rough arena as Hippolyta lifted her arms again. “Hear, all Amazons! A legal challenge has been issued and will take place now! Both combatants will enter the contest grounds.”

Cocky and full of herself, Diana stepped forward and let her hooded robe fall away. After a moment, Lois did the same.

Diana was surprised. Lois’ hair was cropped almost to her skull, and it was a long moment before Diana realized that Lois had planned ahead. There was no way for Lois to be pulled down by her hair, but should Lois get a grip on Diana’s mane, she might be able to strike a blow before Diana could pull free.

Therefore, Diana would not let that happen. It would be embarrassing.

Hippolyta spoke again. “Because of the status of Lois Lane as an outsider, and because she lacks the training and abilities of an Amazon warrior, I will issue the following conditions.”

Conditions? No! Diana could not allow any conditions!

“My queen,” she called out, “no one may set conditions for this contest.”

“On the contrary, my daughter, the royal scribe and the royal historian agree that I may set certain conditions to ensure an equal combat between the challenger and the challenged.”

Thwarted! But no matter. There was little the queen could do to limit the damage Diana would inflict on Lois. “What conditions, my queen?”

“First, you may not use your lasso.”

That one was easy. She detached the lasso from her waist and handed it to Mala. “Done. What else?”

“You may not use your bracelets.”

Diana frowned. She had counted on using them to block any kicks or punches Lois might have thrown, but they certainly weren’t necessary. She unfastened them and handed them to Pallas. “Also done. Are we ready now?”

“Your boots?”

“Truly? My boots?”

“They would be useful as weapons on a fallen foe. Remove them.”

Diana sighed. “Very well.” She pulled them off and placed them on the sand beside Pallas.

“You must also remove your tiara.”

Diana shook her head. “It is a symbol of my royal blood. You may not take it from me.”

“I do not take it from you, Princess. No one may do that, not even the queen. But such a device might easily be used as a weapon, or as defensive armor in such a fight as this. I cannot remove you from your office, nor may I negate your heritage, but you may not wear the tiara during this combat.”

Diana hesitated, then nodded. “Very well. I assume that my friend Mala may hold it for me until we are done here?”

“She may, assuming she understands that this conveys no authority upon her, and that the tiara remains yours and

yours alone as a symbol of your heritage.”

“She understands this.”

Hippolyta shook her head. “We must hear her say it. Mala? Will you hold the tiara of the Princess of Themyscira, knowing that doing so conveys no authority upon you?”

Mala swallowed, then answered, “Yes. I will hold the tiara of the Princess. And that is all I will do with it.”

Diana removed her tiara and gently handed it to Mala. “Keep this for me. I will want it returned spotless and unused very soon.”

Mala swallowed again. “Yes, my Princess.”

Diana turned and faced the queen. “I have agreed to your conditions, Your Highness. May the combat begin now?”

“There is one more royal condition, Princess. You may not use your power of flight.”

“What? But that power is not mine by use of any device! It belongs to me!”

“And so it cannot be taken away from you. But you may not use it during this contest.”

“I protest in the strongest possible terms!”

Hippolyta continued as if Diana had not spoken.

“Should you be detected using your power of flight during this contest, the archers around the arena have orders to shoot you down.”

Gasps from the crowd almost drowned out mutterings of approval. Diana had not counted on such onerous conditions. Without the ability to fly away, she might suffer some real damage from the outsider before killing her, and without her bracelets, she could not deflect the arrows which the guards would certainly send her way were she to go airborne.

Hippolyta called out, “Silence! Hear me, Amazons. The same prohibition stands for Lois Lane. Should she attempt to fly, she also will be shot down.”

Some of the women surrounding the arena laughed. Others just shook their heads and smiled.

Diana did neither. The restriction was a pointed insult. Lois had no power of flight! It was absurd in the extreme!

As was the whispered conversation the queen was now having with Diana’s opponent. She surmised that she herself was the subject, since each of them glanced in her direction during the exchange. And Lois gave the queen a long, meaningful look and nodded in agreement with something the queen had said or asked. Perhaps Hippolyta was telling Lois to surrender and offer herself to be Diana’s slave.

But whatever they spoke of, it would not affect the outcome of the Challenge. Lois would be no one’s slave, Diana knew. She had to die this day.

It was time to begin the combat. “Are you through listing your conditions, my queen?”

Hippolyta lowered her hands and backed up past the border of the arena. “I have stated all the royal conditions.”

“Good. Then let us — “

“Hang on a minute, Princess,” called Lois. “I have a condition of my own.”

“What? What possible condition could you — “

“I got a tip that you like to grab your opponent’s clothing and toss them to the ground. So I think we should make this contest a nature-clad fight.”

Nature-clad? What? No! Who had told her —

Then she noticed her younger sister Troia standing next to the queen. Her face was fixed in a disapproving glare aimed directly at her, and she knew where that suggestion had originated.

And her scheming little sister was right. It would be to Diana's advantage to have those bulky garments Lois wore to use for leverage.

"Lois, are you certain of this?" asked Diana. "Perhaps you would prefer not to die naked."

"I'd prefer not to die at all today, with or without clothes," Lois retorted. "But I doubt you'd be interested in a bra-and-panties match, so we'll just —"

"A what?"

Lois smiled. "It's what they call two women professional wrestlers who like to scream and yell and jump around and slam each other to the floor wearing just their underwear. They're really doing it for the men in the audience, and usually nobody gets hurt badly."

Diana gritted her teeth. "This is a contest to the death! Do you not know this?"

"Yes, I know. It's been explained to me too many times to count. Now, I'm gonna strip down to my skin, and if you're not afraid of me, you'll do the same thing."

With that, Lois began removing her baggy shirt and trousers.

Diana saw no way around it. She would have to fight this opponent while nature-clad.

She reached behind her and unfastened the red, white, and blue suit, then pulled it down to her ankles. As she feared, before she could straighten herself, someone behind her whistled suggestively.

She had always hated those dimples.

Lois had finished removing her garments, and she gathered them up and handed them to Troia, the little traitor. Lois rubbed her newly-shorn head and called out, "Come on, Wonder Woman! Turn around and let me see what an Amazon Princess really looks like!"

More laughter sounded, along with a few catcalls. This was not how Diana had envisioned the beginning of this combat. She had been sure that Lois would beg for her life and foreswear all claim on her husband. Diana would then have slain her quickly and mercifully, then feigned mourning her death. Had Lois tried to fight, Diana would have killed her more brutally but still quickly, then saluted her courage.

But this — this taunting was not how she had imagined it!

Diana knew that she was a beautiful woman. There was no argument about that. But as the onlookers laughed and jeered, Lois took several steps toward the middle of the arena and posed as if standing for a portrait or a carving. She turned and flexed her arms and shoulders, then lifted one knee and met it with an elbow, bowing her head to her fist.

The crowd cheered her!

They were cheering Diana's opponent!

This was a shame not to be borne.

Diana leaped high in the air, intending to land on Lois' head and break her neck. But an arrow flashed in front of

her face as another barely nicked her shin. She barely registered that the spent arrows landed harmlessly in the surf beyond the combat area.

Diana landed awkwardly in the middle of the arena. The crowd had been silenced as suddenly as a bolt of lightning from a clear sky.

Lois took a step closer. "I thought you heard the queen, Princess. If either of us tries to fly, they're gonna shoot us down. Remember?"

Diana took a menacing step forward, then rocked backward with the force of Lois' punch to her left eye. Diana had not even seen Lois move! Where had such speed and skill come from?

It had to be a fluke, an accident, and Diana would prove it as soon as she —

Another blow rocked her, this time a punch to the other eye. Diana glared at Lois. "You — you arrogant, foolish cow! You will regret your arrogance!"

Lois grinned and tilted her head to one side. "Happy birthday, Princess."

"What? What effrontery is this? Today is not my birthday!"

"Really? I thought it was. You wanted me, now you've got me. And look, I even took off the gift-wrapping for you." Lois stepped back and lifted her arms to either side. "Not only that, you're in your birthday suit too. Happy birthday, Princess!"

The Amazons who heard the exchange laughed, then repeated it to other observers. Laughter spread through the crowd once more — and again, it was at Diana's expense.

The woman's tongue insulted Diana simply by existing! She had baited Diana into disrobing in public, she had struck the first two blows between them, and now she taunted a Princess of Themyscira before her subjects! She would die, slowly and painfully and messily, by Diana's own hands!

But why was this outsider so confident, so fearless? How could she even entertain the thought that she might prevail against Wonder Woman? And where had those punches come from?

Had Diana made a mistake in this challenge?

Both contestants assumed fighting stances. The crowd, suddenly silent, held its collective breath for a moment. Then one of the women — Hellene, thought Diana — called out, "I believe the combat has begun!"

And, indeed, it had.

Superman followed the Dark Knight's advice and watched his rooster tail. Twice he thought he'd seen anomalies in the water, but both times they'd turned out to be floating debris.

He'd abandoned the spiral pattern and begun flying in fifteen-mile lateral sweeps, moving north by northwest a little on each pass. He felt that time was running out for Lois, but he had no way to get to her any faster than this.

He'd finally remembered the time when he'd been ill with a Kryptonian virus and Lois had called to him mentally. He tried to call to her in his mind each time he changed direction, but he felt nothing except a faint echo of his call. It gave him a tiny bit of encouragement that she

was still alive, but that was all he received.

He glanced at the sun as he reached the end of the row and realized that it was well past noon. He had to find Lois soon. He didn't know why he felt that way, he only knew that it was urgent that he find her.

So he almost missed the mirror image of his wake as he turned.

But this time, out of the corner of his eye, he did notice it. He dove to the level of the waves and passed over the area again, and this time it all but jumped out at him. The quality of the water changed at one point, and he flew directly at it.

He felt a tiny 'ping' as he penetrated the cloak, and suddenly there was a surprisingly large island in front of him.

There were a number of stone structures on the south side of the island, but none of them seemed to be occupied except for one with a metal antenna-like structure on its roof. Two women stood inside the open wall, apparently tending a machine of some kind.

It had to be the cloaking generator.

Superman flashed to the side of the building without landing. "Hey!"

Both women jumped as if poked with cattle prods. One of them fell down while the other stumbled and grabbed a chair to keep herself upright. Both stared at him as if he were an invader from Mars.

Another time, it would have been funny.

"Do you know where Lois Lane is?"

Neither woman answered. "Look, all I want to do is find her, okay? Just tell me where she is."

The one on the floor blinked rapidly without answering, but the one holding the chair pointed toward the east.

"Is she in a building?" No answer. "Is she inside or outside?" Still no answer. "If you don't tell me where she is, I'm going to break something."

"No!" burst out the one on the floor. "You are a man! You may not set foot on Themyscira! It is forbidden!"

He floated closer. "Fine. I won't set foot on the island if you tell me where Lois Lane is. Deal?"

The other woman took a shuddering breath. "I believe — she must be on the beach with the Princess."

That made no sense to Superman, but if it helped him find Lois he was cool with it. "Okay, they're on the beach. Which beach?"

"East — I think. Yes, the eastern beach! Everyone who can be spared from their tasks is there now."

"Great. Thanks!"

He lifted up into the air and headed east. As he looked toward the water's edge, he saw two women fighting on the sand. Surrounding them appeared to be several thousand other women, all calling out encouragement to one or the other of the fighters. He wondered why he hadn't heard them before, but then realized that he just hadn't been listening.

He picked up one shout from one of the spectators, who said, "You are in trouble, Princess!" He looked closer, and sure enough, the combatant with the long dark hair was Wonder Woman. And she looked to be beaten bloody. He wondered who was good enough to do that much damage to

the Amazon.

Another Amazon, of course, he chided himself. And — they're fighting naked?

He forced himself not to look at the body of either woman, sure that Lois would pluck his eyes out if she knew he'd seen Wonder Woman in the nude. The other fighter's head was all but shorn to the scalp and she seemed to be injured badly as well. That must have been an epic fight, but he was here to find Lois and get her —

Then his jaw almost fell off and hit the sand below him. The other fighter WAS Lois!

Each woman had one fist cocked as if ready to throw a punch.

NO!

He flashed down toward the sand as both women's arms darted forward.

Chapter Thirteen

Hippolyta's worst fears were about to come true. All during the fight she had been tortured by the worst conflict a mother could experience. Her eldest daughter was locked in mortal combat, yet she was also the one who was totally in the wrong. Victory for Diana would mean disaster for the Amazons, yet her defeat would mean her death.

And Hippolyta shuddered at the hint of the thought that she might have to bury her eldest child.

The best outcome would have been for the outsider to have battered Diana into submission and refused to take her life. Such an act would have made Diana Lois' servant for life. And it was the outcome Lois had promised to work toward if she could.

But the outsider's eyes were glazed and dull. Her body language told the queen that she should already have been pummeled into unconsciousness, yet still she stood and defied Diana. Lois surely did not remember her agreement with Hippolyta now. If Diana were to fall, her opponent would surely slay her.

And if Diana were to prevail, she would surely slay the outsider woman to gain her mate. But the Princess had not counted on Lois putting up such a brave and lengthy fight that the majority of the spectators would eventually take her side. Each blow Lois struck brought actual cheers from many in the crowd, and each blow landed on her by the Princess brought more cries of chagrin and encouragement for Lois than cheers for Diana.

Hippolyta had never seen any of the "Rocky" movies, but she would have recognized the sentiment of the poorly regarded challenger fighting the champion to a bloody standstill.

And the queen could look around and know that her daughter had committed a serious strategic error. In her quest to achieve the throne and bear a child with more potential than any other in Amazon history, Diana had managed to divide the nation and place herself in an untenable political position. Even if she prevailed in this contest, her condition would not allow her to lead her followers, nor would Superman be interested in a bloody and beaten lover. She would not be able to fulfill the promises she had made, and her movement would either disintegrate or coalesce in a violent internal conflict.

There was no positive outcome in sight.

Both women were fighting with the last bits of strength in their bodies. Each one had only one hand available to strike a blow, and the queen feared that they each might manage to take the life of the other with one final strike.

And there was nothing she could do to help either her nation or her daughter. Neither the law nor Amazon tradition would allow anyone to intervene.

As Diana tensed to throw one last punch and as Lois braced herself to respond, a sharp ‘crack-boom’ sounded in the sky and a blue-and-red streak of light flashed down to the ground from the cloudless sky. Hippolyta glanced upward for a moment, but could not discern the source of either the light or the thunder.

She looked at the two combatants again, expecting one or both to have finally fallen for the last time.

But that was not what she saw.

A man wearing blue tights and a long red cape was standing in the sand in front of Lois — A MAN WAS STANDING ON THEMYSKIRA!

This could not be! By every law within the canon of the Amazons, this man could not be allowed to live!

The queen did not need to issue a command. The four nearest archers raised their bows and let fly. All four arrows traced a true path to their target.

And all four arrows fell to the sand in pieces.

She looked closer. Diana lay on the sand a few feet from the man, pushing with one hand and trying to get up, with little visible result. Lois had fallen limply into the man’s arms and seemed to be trying to embrace him.

The man raised his head. His face was aflame with fury and he shouted, “THIS STOPS NOW!”

Two of the stunned archers pulled new arrows from their quivers and drew back their bows. But their arrows never left, because both of their bowstrings burst into flame where they looped over the top of the bow.

“I SAID STOP AND I MEANT IT!”

The man looked down at the sand a few paces from where he stood and it suddenly exploded. When the debris settled, Hippolyta could see a pit nearly ten feet across and at least fifteen feet deep. She couldn’t see the bottom clearly, but a great deal of heat and steam came billowing out.

This man had to be Superman!

She stepped forward and shouted, “Amazons! Hold! All of you, hold your places! I, the queen, command you to stay your hands!”

The man’s head snapped around toward her as her subjects obeyed. “Are you the one in charge here?” he demanded.

“I am the queen.”

“Where is your doctor?”

Hippolyta opened her mouth to protest his presence, then saw the set of his jaw and the tension in his shoulders. If he could create an explosion beneath the sand without moving, there was no telling what else he might do.

She turned and called, “Epione! Your skills are needed!”

The healer detached herself from one of the areas where the loudest cheers for Lois had sounded. “You must allow her to lie down,” the healer said to Superman. “I cannot examine her while you hold her.”

Superman laid Lois on the sand as gently as a mother places her newborn on her first bed. And the queen suddenly realized that an even worse case scenario than she had previously imagined had come to pass.

They had allowed someone to batter Superman’s wife nearly to her death. And he was well and truly angry.

Before she could work through the ramifications of their actions, he looked into her eyes and spoke in a cold, flat tone. “She will live or I will destroy this place.”

“What?”

He glanced down at the healer, whose hands had not hesitated a moment in treating Lois, then looked up at Hippolyta again. “I said, she will live or I will destroy this place.”

The moment allowed her to recover some of her balance. “And if we do not allow you to do so? What then?”

“You can’t stop me.”

“But — but we have researched you and your behavior! You do not visit vengeance upon anyone, nor do you resort to unnecessary violence! In fact, your stated mission is to help others, to stand for truth and justice, not to destroy! You will not harm us!”

The man snapped his head to one side. Perhaps fifteen paces away, another explosion rent the sand, this one more violent than the first. Hippolyta sensed as much as she saw Epione cover Lois’ body with her own to protect her from the falling debris.

Superman glared at her. “You’re in no position to argue with me, lady. You have your people heal her or I will destroy your cloak generator and any technology you might use to fix it. I will knock down every building I see. I will burn your fields and sink every piece of food on the island in the deepest trench in the sea. And I will tell every nation on earth that there are thousands of available women on this island, all of them just begging for a man to take care of every one of them.”

Hippolyta was horrified. He could indeed do all of those things — and, judging by the expression on his face and the cant of his body, he would do them.

She stepped around him and bent low. “Can you heal her, Epione?”

The healer looked up. “I believe so, but I am not certain. I must also see to the Princess. Her condition is — “

“No.”

The healer’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Epione, your primary task is to heal this woman. You will devote whatever resources to her which might be required to accomplish this goal. Whatever is left over may be used to heal my daughter.”

“But — your Highness, does not the Princess — “

Hippolyta tried not to allow the trembling in her heart to be heard in her voice. “This is my royal command, Epione. I ask you to obey without question.”

The healer hesitated a moment, then nodded. “I will do as you command, my queen.” Then she stood and waved for one of the women in the crowd to join her.

A young woman stumbled to the healer’s side. Epione had to shake her arm to get the girl to look away from the blue-and-red-clad newcomer. “Go to the hospital and send two stretchers with teams of four bearers each. Then prepare

two beds, one in the royal lounge and one in the noble lounge.”

“Yes, Healer!” The young woman scampered off.

Superman turned to face the healer. “Will she live?”

The healer took a deep breath. “I believe so, but I must begin her treatment as soon as possible. She is badly injured.”

Hippolyta almost missed the tremor in his voice as he said, “Please do your best.”

“I shall give her all of the attention she requires.”

He nodded and turned back to the queen. She noted that his face had cooled from molten fire to granite. “I’m going to stay with her.”

His manner brooked no disagreement, so she merely nodded. “May I assign guards to you? To prevent other attempts on your life.”

“I told you that you can’t hurt me.”

“But your wife can be hurt. I do not wish for our home to disappear because of the actions of one well-intentioned but ill-informed patriot.”

He considered for a moment, then nodded. “Two at a time. And make sure they know how important she is to me.”

“I will make that abundantly clear, Superman.”

“Make sure you do.” His shoulders hunched closer and his neck bulged with barely restrained power. “I’m holding you personally responsible for what happens to her.”

The hospital was as quiet as the temple after services, the only sounds coming from the healers assisting Epione to treat Lois Lane, wife of Superman, and from those who cared for Diana, Princess of Themyscira.

The throne room, however, was a boiling caldron of anger and offense and fear. Hippolyta was surprised and concerned that so much noise was coming from only eleven Amazons.

“We cannot allow a man to dictate to us!” bellowed Euboea. “He has violated our law! He must be made to suffer!”

“And what would you do to him?” challenged Phillipus. “You saw how the guards’ arrows shattered against his skin! And how he burned their bows from where he stood, not to mention the new features on that beach which might swallow a small boat were any of us idiotic enough to place one there!”

Hippolyta raised a hand. “It is indeed our tradition not to allow men to reside on our island. But you, Mnemosyne, have you not researched this question in our histories?”

Mnemosyne rose and bowed. “At your command, my queen, I have researched this subject. It seems that in the very beginning of our history, men were quartered in restricted areas of our island to provide both combat training to our ancestors and to help defend them against attack. Men were not expressly forbidden from setting foot on Themyscira until approximately eight hundred fifty years ago. That was when the Husbands’ Village was established.”

Euboea raised her arms to either side. “Are you saying that our nation has not always shunned men? What madness is this?”

Mnemosyne slowly turned to face her challenger. “I am repeating what is written in the personal diaries of the earliest queens, irrespective of what is taught to our daughters from the day they are born. And this is not the first time I have found mention of men on Paradise Island.” She lifted her hand against the burble of incredulity. “The Princess also knows of these histories, and I personally observed her reading them when she believed that no one else was in the library. I believe that Princess Diana had planned to supplant our queen and invite her new mate to join her here on Themyscira.”

Charges and counter-charges erupted from the group, some accusing the historian of distorting the truth or even lying, and others either attacking or defending the Princess and her actions.

The queen had heard enough. “Hold!” she cried. No one seemed to hear her. “I CRY HOLD!” she shouted. The tumult ceased as if severed by an expert wielding an axe. “This situation is unprecedented in our history. Were this man a normal man, we would expel him from our shores, or slay him if he resisted. But he is not a normal man.”

Mala snorted and crossed her arms. “Normal or not, he must leave these shores immediately.”

Phillipus smiled and pointed toward the infirmary. “I invite you to enforce your will upon him, Mala. In fact, I invite you to lead any of your friends and supporters — and any friends and supporters of the Princess — to accompany you. And do let me know how well that works out for you.”

Mala turned in her seat and twisted her upper lip into a snarl. “You would not speak thusly to me if — “ she broke off her statement.

“If what, Mala? If the Princess had accomplished her revolution? I daresay you are correct, for any semblance of freedom would be snuffed out with little mercy on the part of the snufflers.”

Before the tumult could graduate into a riot, Hippolyta raised her hand once more. “Hold, all of you! Allow me to complete my thought before you rend me from the throne.”

The queen glared at Mala, who averted her eyes and tried to make herself smaller. Hippolyta took a deep breath. “I am now issuing a royal decree. This man — this Superman — will be given free access to any and all facilities and organizations in Themyscira. There will be no restrictions on his movements whatsoever.”

Even Phillipus seemed stunned by the pronouncement. Hippolyta dropped her voice from ‘royal decree’ mode to an informal one. “I ask you, my advisors, to tell me which of us might be able to force Superman to do anything he does not wish to do. And I would also point out that he has done nothing for the past six hours save to sit beside Lois Lane’s bed and watch over her. If he had intended harm to any of us, we would already be harmed.”

“What of the Princess?” Mala demanded. “She lies as near to death’s door as does this outsider woman! Yet you have ordered our best healer to tend not to the Princess but to her opponent!”

“Yes. It was for the benefit of all Amazons that I did so. Think, Mala! How long would Superman’s wrath be stayed if the outsider were to die? How much more angry might he be if he believed that we had not done everything possible

to save her?”

“That brings up another point, Your Highness,” put in Euboea. “This — this ‘Superman’ halted a legitimate Challenge before the outcome was known. What is to be done about that?”

Hippolyta sighed. “Again, what would you have us do? Shall we restart the contest when both Diana and Lois Lane are able to stand upright without assistance? When they are fully healed? Or shall you drag them from their sickbeds to pit them against each other once again? And while you are doing that, you should come up with a plan to deal with Superman.”

“I do not fear him!”

“That’s not a very smart attitude,” said a male baritone.

Every head spun around to find the owner of the voice. He strode to the middle of the room without any of the usual courtesies and put his hands on his hips, then pointed to Euboea. “You. Yes, you. Come here.”

“With pleasure!” She leaped up and skipped toward him, then threw a sudden punch at his jaw.

Her fist cracked against his face and she fell to her knees, silently cradling her injured hand.

Superman sighed at the injured woman, then lifted his head to address the group. “That’s not what I came in here for,” he said. “I only wanted to tell you that your healer says that Lois is stable, and so is the Princess. She thinks that both of them will recover fully.”

Mala huffed and crossed her arms. “And you believe her?”

He turned. “What’s your name?”

“I am Mala! I serve my nation without fear!”

“I hope that doesn’t include throwing punches at me.”

“I would not sully my hands upon you!”

“Well, that’s good, because I’d hate to think that I’d have to throw you into the ocean to unsully you.”

Mala’s face twisted in shock for a moment, then she resumed her haughty mien and turned away from him. “Look,” he said, “I came over here to tell you that I’m going to leave for about ten minutes and then come back. I heard what the queen said about giving me full access to everything on the island, but as long as Lois is safe you don’t have to worry about me.”

“So go!” growled Mala. “Depart! What is stopping you?”

“Nothing is stopping me from leaving, Mala,” he replied, “and nothing can stop me from coming back. And remember, the only thing keeping me from wrecking your island is Lois’ survival and recovery. So if anyone has any ideas about finishing the job Wonder Woman started, you’d better forget them.” He turned and looked at each woman in the assembly in turn. “Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

No one spoke for a moment, then Hippolyta said, “She will not be harmed in any manner while you are away, Superman.”

“Good. In that case,” he indicated the still kneeling Euboea, “you should get someone to look at this woman. I think her hand is broken.”

“It is,” Euboea grated.

He appeared to think about speaking again, but only turned and strode out the door through which he had

entered, his cape flowing majestically behind him.

Hippolyta sighed. She could see why Diana had desired him as a mate.

And she could also see why he would never be hers.

He’d called in stories from exotic locations before, but never on a satellite phone while floating above a cloaked island wearing the super-suit. It was a first even for Clark Kent.

“That’s right, Jim,” he said. “The story I want you to turn in is that Lois went to Themyscira to report on Wonder Woman dealing with a serious political problem, and while they were there they both got hurt in a battle between the rebels and the royalist supporters. And the Amazons were nice enough to allow me to stay with Lois while she recuperates.”

“Yeah, right,” drawled Jim. “Perry’s not going to buy that any more than I’m buying it.”

“That’s my story and I’m sticking to it, okay?”

A ‘humph’ of disgust was the only response.

“Look, Jim, if we print the truth, either the Planet gets painted as a scandal sheet and no one ever believes anything else that shows up on the front page, or there’ll be a public outcry for revenge against all the Amazons and we’ll have ourselves a war. On the other hand, if Perry prints this story and Lois gets time to recover, she’ll have enough material for several positive follow-up pieces, and the Amazons get a chance to ease out of hiding on their own terms.”

There was silence on the satellite phone for a long moment, then Jimmy said, “You are the only person I know who would offer to help these people after what they did to Lois. You really are a hopeless Boy Scout, you know that?”

“There are worse things I could be.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Okay, I’ll pass this on to the Chief, but don’t expect him to be happy about it.”

“I don’t. But I do expect to see that story in the Planet soon.”

“Fine. Hey, when are you going to call again?”

“I don’t know, but it won’t be too long. I have to get back to Lois.”

“Okay.”

“Bye for now, Jim.”

“Hey, wait!”

“What is it?”

Jim was silent for a moment, then he asked, “Just how bad did Lois get hurt?”

Clark hesitated, then admitted, “Worse than ever before. I wasn’t sure she — when I first saw her, she —”

“That’s cool, CK, I got it. You tell her that I’m rooting for her.”

“I will. And thanks, Jim.”

Diana’s eyes slowly opened. Hanging above her head was a lamp shining into her eyes. She tried to raise her hand to shade her face, but a quick shot of pain in her elbow told her that it was a bad idea.

The pain also cleared her mind. She turned her head to either side as best she could, then looked down at her body.

She was covered by a white sheet. One leg seemed to be larger than the other — it was probably the broken one,

encased in a cast. And the arm she'd tried to lift was similarly encased.

With her other hand, Diana carefully examined her chest and stomach. There were bandages around her middle, and more places which were tender than ones which were not. She tried to move her free leg, but found that she was secured to the bed.

She was strapped in like an old woman who might wander off into the night.

Perhaps it is for the best, she thought. Lois had fought like a Kraken before finally succumbing. Odd, though, that she could not recall the final blow of the fight. Perhaps she had suffered a head injury which interfered with her memory.

A face drifted into her line of vision, one she felt she should recognize. "Hagggh?" she croaked.

A voice came from the face. "I will bring the healer, Princess."

Diana tried to say that she desired something to drink, but no sound came from her mouth. A few moments later, Cydippe and another woman leaned over her.

"We are glad that you have awakened, Princess," said the other woman. "Do you desire something cool to drink?"

Again Diana's voice failed, so she nodded her head. "Very good," said the woman. "Cydippe, will you assist the princess? Here is a glass of fruit juice and a straw."

"I shall, Timora."

Timora! That was the other woman's name. She was an associate of Epione. But where was the chief healer? Surely the Princess of Themyscira deserved the best of care.

Cydippe placed the straw in Diana's mouth. "Take a small mouthful at first, Princess. We do not wish you to choke."

Diana felt the chilled juice flow all the way down into her stomach, and the tissues in her mouth seemed to rejuvenate with every swallow. She finally felt able to ask, "Where is — is the queen?"

"She is in conference with her advisors, my Princess. Here, drink some more juice."

Diana took another gulp, this one almost in self-defense. "Where is Lois' body? I assume it is in a place of honor."

"Lois is in the next room, my Princess. She is recovering well. Here, drink some more."

"Recovering?" The straw fell from Diana's mouth. "She is here? She still lives?"

"You must not become agitated, Princess! You will re-injure yourself. Please, take some juice. Then perhaps you may sleep."

Diana turned her head away from the straw. "I cannot rest until my opponent in the Challenge is dead, or until I am dead." Forgetting that she was bound to the bed, she tried to shift her unbroken arm under her to prop herself up. "Assist me, Cydippe. I must finish her, and quickly."

Cydippe sat back and stared at her. "You are mad if you believe you can slay her now! The queen has uttered an edict to say that Superman has royal permission to go anywhere he wishes on the island! And for now, he wishes to sit beside Lois Lane and protect her!"

"What? Superman — he is here?"

She slid back down onto the bed as Cydippe let out a

bitter bark of laughter. "Yes, Princess. Your Challenge has brought to our island a man who would overthrow all of our traditions and practices, whether ancient or modern, and that without a second thought! We are helpless against him!"

Diana shook her head. "I would speak with him."

"He will not leave the bedside of the outsider."

"Nevertheless, I require that you inform him that I wish to speak with him."

"That won't be necessary."

The manly baritone sent a thrill down Diana's spine, just as it always had. Cydippe, however, spun out of her chair to the floor and crouched in obvious fear before him. Diana frowned. Despite his great power, Superman was not one to be feared. And she had believed that she had trained Cydippe to behave better.

"You said you wanted to speak to me?"

It took Diana a moment to realize that his question was directed to her. When she did, her face brightened and she took a deep breath. "Yes, Superman, I did." She turned to her frightened friend. "Cydippe, would you inform Healer Timora that I would like to see her?"

Cydippe trembled and looked up at Superman. He stared back for a long moment and she dropped her gaze to the floor. Then he said, "Go and do what the Princess told you to do."

She scampered out of the room and all but ran down the hall. Diana smiled up at him, but before she could speak, he said, "You were fighting Lois."

"Well — yes, we were fighting."

"Over me."

"That is what the Challenge —"

"What do you think would have happened if you had won?"

"I — I would have comforted you in your grief."

He stepped closer, his face like carved marble. "And when I found out that you'd killed her? What then? Just how long do you think you would have lived?"

"But — but the Challenge was legal! It was all according to ancient Amazon law and tradition!"

"Lois isn't an Amazon."

"Huh," breathed Diana. "She fought as if she were."

"If you had killed her, I don't know what I would have done. But I can guarantee you that I would be even less happy than I am right now." He leaned down. "And right at this moment I am farther away from happy than I have ever been in my entire life."

Less happy — why, he was actually angry!

"But she — but Lois has not given you a child despite being wed to you for five years! I can give you a child! I can allow you to put away your weak Clark Kent identity so that you might live openly as Superman at all times! I am far more suited to be your mate than she!"

His face all but glowed with internal heat. He lifted one hand and formed it into a fist. The amount of pressure within that fist would have crushed every one of Diana's bones in an instant.

In that moment, Diana understood Cydippe's reaction to the Man of Steel.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then relaxed

his hand and let it drop to the side. “I don’t know what your mother — the queen — has planned for you, but I will tell you now that if I ever see you in Metropolis again, I will personally drive you out of town. I will do whatever it takes to make sure you don’t ever come back. And I will fight you if that’s what I have to do to make it happen. In fact, I will fight you and whoever you bring to help you. If that includes every Amazon on this island, that’s who I’ll fight, one at a time or all at once.” He stood tall and straight, and his arms crossed over his chest. “Do I make myself perfectly clear, Princess Diana?”

“But — you — I — “

His voice was harder than diamond and colder than an Arctic gale. “Think about this. I am strong enough and fast enough to pull your head completely off your neck, drop it in the queen’s lap, turn around and grab Lois, and be far away from here before you stop moving your lips. Tell me if I am making myself clear now.”

She looked into his eyes and she knew real terror. He could, in truth, do exactly as he had just described, and no force on earth could prevent him.

Except, perhaps, Lois Lane.

Diana tried to swallow and barely managed to clear her suddenly dry mouth. “Yes. I understand.”

“So you’re not coming back to Metropolis? Not ever?”

The words came hard, but they came. “No. I will not return to Metropolis.”

“Good.” He turned and took a step away, then stopped and looked back over his shoulder. “Someone told me about the fight and how Lois caught you with a kick between your legs.” His lip curled into a mean smile. “I bet that hurt, didn’t it?” Then his expression hardened again and he added, “But not as much as it would if I did the kicking.”

And he was gone.

Diana flopped back onto the bed, suddenly awash with perspiration. It was all over. She had failed miserably and earned the enmity of the world’s strongest hero instead of his love. All was lost, and she had no hope of recovering any particle of her former aspirations.

The folly of her gamble struck her with the force of one of Lois’ blows. It had been her hubris, her pride, her certainty that she alone understood everything she needed to understand and knew everything she needed to know which had brought her to this end.

Now the queen would dismantle her organization. Her followers would either repudiate her or follow her into whatever punishment the queen deemed appropriate. Diana hoped she would only be banished, perhaps to a far northern clime. She had heard of ‘snow’ but had never seen it. Experiencing such a phenomenon for the first time would surely be a more pleasurable moment than contemplating her imminent death.

Then she realized that her fear of Superman had caused her to lose control of her bladder, just as the man she’d used as a pawn to track Superman had done. The indignities overwhelmed her and she cried out in anguish and shame.

The tears began and she believed that they might never stop.

Chapter Fourteen

Clark sat down beside Lois’ bed again. Epione sat on the

other side, gently prodding Lois’ shoulder and making notes on a pad of paper.

“How much longer will she be out?” he asked.

“I gave her an herbal drink which will let her sleep until some time around mid-day tomorrow. You will be able to speak with her at that time.”

He hesitated, not wanting to hear the answer, but knowing that he had to hear it. “Will she be all right? I mean, she seems to be hurt worse than Wonder Woman was.”

Epione didn’t respond directly. “I understand that you had a conversation with our beloved Princess.” The healer glanced up at him. “I assume that you allowed her to live.”

“For now.”

She stopped and fixed him with a direct stare. “You need not speak so dangerously to me, Man of Steel. I know that such words do not come easily to your lips, nor do they come often.”

“How do you know that?”

“I can read your heart. And I spent time with Lois Lane before the contest began. She credited her compassion for others to you.” She sat back. “And I believe it to be the truth.”

He frowned and looked down at his sleeping wife. “I can’t tell you how scared I was when I realized that she and Wonder Woman were beating the crap out of one another.” He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment, then said, “She’s been threatened before, been kidnapped before, faced real danger before, but when I saw her getting beaten like that in front of all of those witnesses and not one of you was making a move to stop it — “ He stopped and shuddered. “I kind of lost it for a minute or two.”

Epione shook her head. “Had you truly ‘lost it,’ as you term it, you would have slain the Princess. Instead, you merely pushed her to the sand with your breath. You did not even touch her. And you would have slain the guards who shot at you instead of merely unstringing their bows.” She wet a cloth and put ointment on it, then dabbed at Lois’ facial injuries. “Even in your anger and fear, you refused to take a life. You are indeed a hero.”

He crossed his arms and sank backwards onto the bed beside Lois’ feet. “I don’t feel very heroic right now.”

“That is an understandable state of mind. Since you asked me for my medical expertise, may I now take your mind off your troubles concerning yourself and tell you of Lois’ injuries?”

He waited a breath, then sat up. “Yes. Please.”

Epione put the cloth down and glanced at her notes. “She has a serious concussion, but she has responded well to the herbal therapy and I believe she will recover fully. She may have difficulty with her sense of balance for three, or perhaps four days, but that will pass.

“Her facial injuries will also heal, and I do not believe she will retain any disfiguring scars. Her teeth, however, are another matter. Several of them are broken, one down to the gum line. But I believe we can regenerate them the same way we regenerate those of the Amazons who are injured in combat training or other accidents. We have, in fact, already begun this treatment.”

His eyebrows rose. “You mean you can re-grow her

teeth?”

“Yes. And they will be as strong as if they had never been damaged.”

“How can you do that?”

“Surely you do not believe that our cloak is the only technology which we possess but which your world does not. We may have been isolated for centuries, Man of Steel, but we have not been idle for that time.”

He nodded. “That’s great to hear. I like her smile the way it was the last time I saw her with hair.” He tilted his head as if examining Lois’ mouth. “I think she’s got a couple of cavities in there somewhere, too. Can you fix those while you’re doing the other?”

Epione smiled. “Yes. I will examine and repair all of her teeth.” She glanced at the chart again. “Her right shoulder was dislocated. We have reset it, and with proper exercise and therapy she should suffer no lasting injury. Her right hand was broken in several places, and I believe that she will recover full use of it also. But we cannot re-grow nerve tissue, Superman. If there is nerve damage which I have not yet found, we cannot repair it.”

His face fell. “You mean she might have a permanent loss of function in her hand?”

“I cannot tell as yet, but it is possible. Not likely, but possible, and I felt you should be aware.”

His voice was flat. “What else?”

“Her left ankle will heal completely. She will be kicking wayward princesses with abandon before long.”

He glanced up and caught her slight grin. After a long moment, he returned it. “Thank you for all you’ve done for her.”

Epione sighed. “Were it not for us, she would never have been injured. What I do now is not enough to repay what she has done for us.”

“What do you mean by that?”

The healer moved to a chair beside Lois’ bed and assumed a lecturing posture. “Had the Princess defeated Lois in combat, she would have won the right to pursue you. I know, you would not have cooperated, but in the meantime Diana would have created havoc here. Our lives would have been disrupted, our political structure might have toppled, and she might have led an actual revolution against her mother. Had she succeeded in that endeavor, we might have entered into war with your people, one which would surely have cost many lives on both sides.” She canted her head in his direction. “I believe that many lives were saved today, mostly through the efforts of the wife of Superman, but with your assistance also.”

Clark shrugged his shoulders. “Happy to have been of service, ma’am.”

“My thanks are to Lois. She has prevented this disaster by fighting the Princess to a standstill.” Epione shook her head. “Had I not seen it with my own eyes, I might not credit such a report. Are all women in your city so skilled in unarmed combat?”

“No. But a lot of them are. And some of the men are even better. And they have weapons that can kill from long distances.” He exhaled deeply. “If Diana had really started a war with the outside world, your fighters probably would have been wiped out within days.”

The healer nodded. “Then I am very glad we did not go to war with you.”

A quiet knock sounded from the doorway to the room and saved him from replying. “Excuse me? Is Lois awake yet? I would like to — oh! I — I beg your forgiveness, Superman!”

A teenager with a striking resemblance to Diana fell to one knee and ducked her head. Epione rose and went to her. “She sleeps, Troia, and she will not awaken until the morrow. And you should be asleep yourself.”

Without looking up, the girl asked, “Have I offended the Superman?”

Epione turned her head to Clark, who took it as an invitation to start acting less like a threat and more like himself. “I am not offended, young lady.” He stood and walked over to her. “Why don’t you stand up?”

She slowly looked up at his outstretched hand, then carefully took it and rose to her feet. “Please — forgive my boldness, Superman. I only wished to see how Lois is recovering.”

He released her fingers and put his hands on his hips. “Why is that, exactly?”

Her eyes widened but her voice remained steady. “I was tasked to give her advice on how to fight my sister. I did not — “

“Sister?” he burst out. “You’re Wonder Woman’s sister?”

“Yes. Although the title ‘Wonder Woman’ is bestowed upon royalty when we leave the island to seek a mate and a father for our children. It is not a true name. I hope to be chosen when I am old enough.”

“I see. Well, the healer just finished telling me about Lois’ recovery, and she thinks it will go very well.” He tried a small smile. “I think you can come see her tomorrow afternoon if you want to.”

The girl’s face glowed. “Oh, I very much want to! Thank you!” She turned to leave, then stopped. “Please, Superman, if you have the opportunity, I would ask you to tell Lois that I am glad that she survived the Challenge. Also, please let her know that I still have the clothing she wore when she came here, and I will launder those garments myself before I return them to her.” She hesitated, then continued, “And I am glad that she did not kill my sister, even though Diana is quite haughty and pernicious and hard-headed. And jealous.” She paused, then added, “And stupid.”

The girl spun and quick-marched out of the hospital room, leaving Clark trying not to laugh aloud. “Troia is her own woman,” said Epione quietly. “She does not follow in her sister’s shadow.”

“I guess not. Say, do you have a cot or a mat or something that I can lie down on? I want to get some sleep and I’m not leaving Lois.”

“You require such things as sleep and comfort?”

“I don’t require it, but it might be better if I don’t float around during the night. I wouldn’t want to accidentally fall on Lois again.”

Epione smiled at the thought. “Of course. I will send a maid with a pallet for you. Now I must examine the Princess and see if she requires my ministrations.”

He knew it was a dream, but he didn't care. In the dream, Lois wore something diaphanous which covered her from neck to toe yet left nothing to his imagination. She floated toward him with a soft and sexy smile and reached out to pull him into her embrace. She opened her mouth slightly to press it against his lips.

Then she began singing "The Guy With the Computer Know-How."

It was the ring tone on his phone for numbers not in his contact list. Somebody was calling him. He lurched up from his computer desk and pawed for it. He finally found it under a discarded sock. "Hello?"

"Olsen. Report."

The gruff voice chased every vestige of sleep from his mind. "Uh. Right. Mr. Batman. Sir."

"Never mind that. How is Ms. Lane?"

"Uh, yeah. Last time I talked to CK, he said that she's recovering nicely. Apparently the Amazons have some pretty neat medical technology and very effective herbal medicine. She should be on her feet in another day or two and back at work on a limited basis next week."

"That's good. I'll pass it on."

"Pass it on — to who?"

"To 'whom,' you mean."

"Yeah, that's what I —"

"Tell Superman to come and see me when he has a chance. I'll meet him where we met before. And I'll let him know what I want him to do."

"Uh — do?"

"Don't worry, he'll know what you mean."

And the line went dead. Jimmy looked at his clock and read five-sixteen in the morning. Too early to get up and too late to go back to bed. Best thing he could do now was to get a shower and get ready for another Monday morning.

Bruce Wayne leaned back in the recliner and crossed his arms. Selina Kyle turned toward him in her chair and smiled coyly. "Things are well, I take it?"

"As well as they can be. Ms. Lane is recovering nicely and her husband is there with her. She should be back at work in a week or so."

"Their doctors are that good? Maybe you should have Alfred consult with them. You know, for the times when you bite off more than you can chew."

"There aren't many of those times and you know it," he growled.

"Enough so that they pile up. Eventually you'll just fall apart when you jump down off a building or stop a punch."

He frowned, considering the idea, and decided it held merit. "Good thinking. I'll see if I can set something up."

"That's why you pay me the big bucks, handsome." She sipped at her pineapple martini. "So, when do you tell the Big Blue Boy Scout who you are?"

He looked at her and frowned slightly. "That would entail telling him who you are, too. And I'm not about to do that without talking it over with you first."

"Thank you for your kind consideration. We'll have to spend some real time discussing that one." More of the martini disappeared. "On a slightly different subject, what

do you plan to ask him to do, clean out some Rogue's lair and trip all the booby traps so you can go in full-bore without getting clobbered?"

He put his head back and lifted one eyebrow. "No. I'm going to walk into the Iceberg Lounge with him right behind me and buy him a drink."

"What?" Her eyes grew until they dominated her face. "With all those costumed Rogues in there you're going to — he's going to — and —"

"That's about the size of it, yes. And I plan to use real money, too. I don't want to run a tab in the Penguin's place of business."

Selina sputtered. Then she stared at him in amazement. Then she chuckled. Then she burst out laughing.

He smiled, then chortled slightly. "I figure it will shake up the costumed crooks and either scare them or provoke them into doing something really stupid."

"Oh, you'll be busy as an IRS auditor in Vegas! You know you'll turn the place upside down!" She grabbed her stomach and laughed again. "They won't know what hit them!"

"And I'm not going to tell him why we're there. He'll play his part all the better for not knowing what's going on."

It was too much. She jumped up from the chair and ran to the bathroom, calling out, "You are so cruel!"

He smiled a very un-Batman-like smile as he envisioned the reaction to Superman's presence in the middle of all those themed criminals. He hoped he could keep a scowl on his face, especially when Ivy tried to use her man-enslaving pheromones on him.

Lois' eyes drifted open. The late afternoon sunlight from the elegant window frame diffused throughout the room and gave it a homey, lived-in feel. She glanced at the calendar Clark had brought her and smiled. It was already late Friday, and she felt far better today than any other day since the fight.

Or maybe she shouldn't count the first two days. She hadn't done much more than sleep and drink and pee. It had been almost like being an infant all over again, this time with her husband there watching her be treated like an invalid.

Of course, that's what she had been. But she wasn't one now.

Lois sat up slowly and took inventory of herself. Under her thin sleeping shift, her right shoulder was a bit stiff and her right hand was still wrapped tightly, but the pain was gone from both of them. Her left ankle and foot were wrapped in some kind of stiff leaf-and-vine concoction which seemed to function as a walking boot, and the ankle itself didn't hurt. Epione had promised her that the gizmo would come off before she and Clark left the island on Sunday afternoon, and she was really looking forward to being free once again.

She touched her tongue to her teeth. They seemed to be healing nicely, and Epione was very pleased with the results she'd achieved. The healer had expressed concern that Lois' replacement teeth wouldn't bond with her body even though they'd been grown using her own cells, but they seemed to

be doing exactly what everyone had hoped they would do. And she was ready to come off the liquid diet.

She looked around. The floor-length toga-like gown Epione had brought her was hanging on the wall beside her gi, which Donna — or Troia, or whatever her preferred name was — had returned to her the previous day. Clark wasn't there, but she hadn't expected him to be. She knew he had to make early evening patrols over Metropolis even if she was recovering from her injuries here on Themyscira.

She wobbled to the luxurious Grecian-style bathroom and returned to the bed, then decided that doggone it, she'd been in this room for four days and hadn't seen very much of the island. It was time to take a short tour.

The gown was easy to put on and fasten — or would have been had Lois been completely healthy. But she was determined, and after a brief struggle she was dressed decently enough to appear among civilized people. Or, at least among the Amazons of Themyscira.

There were two armed guards outside the door, of course, and they reacted as she stepped out of the room. One of them stiffened as the door opened and stepped away from Lois, looking around to prevent anyone from shooting an arrow or throwing a knife at her.

The other one inclined her head without closing her eyes. "Lady Lois, do you require anything?"

"Yes. I need to get out of the room and see the sun again."

The guard's eyebrows flinched. "I am not certain that it would be proper for you to leave the safety of your room at this time."

Lois sighed. "Look, I'm not trying to make your job more difficult. I just can't stay in there any longer! Haven't you ever been cooped up in a room somewhere and gotten cabin fever?"

"You suffer from a fever?" The woman's face showed alarm. "If you are ill, we must summon the healer immediately!"

"No! I mean, I'm not sick. It's just an expression. It means that I need to look at something other than those very pretty walls in there."

The guard's expression softened and she nodded once. "I believe I understand your predicament. Will you allow us to accompany you?"

"Um, how about just one of you comes with me? I'd rather not leave the room unguarded even if I'm not in it."

The other woman said, "That is wise counsel, Aella. I will remain here unless you prefer to do so."

Aella shook her head. "No. You stay. I will accompany Lady Lois on her walk."

Aella took off her helmet and set it beside the door, then leaned her halberd against the wall above it. "I am ready to accompany the Lady."

Lois took in the sword on her left hip, the throwing stars on her belt buckle, and the big utility knife on her right hip. "Are you sure you don't want to take a bazooka or call in air support?"

Aella frowned. "I apologize, my Lady. I do not know what those words mean."

"Never mind. It's just my irritation showing. Why don't you give me the nickel tour of the island?"

Aella appeared to think hard about Lois' question, then gestured to one side. "Perhaps it might be better if your first — ah, 'nickel tour' were a brief one. I would not wish for the healer to be angry with me for allowing you to exhaust yourself."

"Good idea. Lead the way, Aella."

They returned to her room before dark without incident. Lois was tired but refreshed, and she lay down for a brief nap which turned into a full night's sleep.

When she woke up the next morning, Clark was sleeping on the floor beside her bed. His suit was hung on the wall beside her gown, and he wore only a T-shirt and boxers. He looked so wonderful to her that she decided her recovery was advanced far enough for a little fun with him.

When she came back from the bathroom, she lay down next to him — noting that her repaired shoulder was usable but still a little touchy — and kissed him gently.

His eyes fluttered open and he smiled. "I hope I'm not dreaming."

"If you are, I'm dreaming too."

His arm gently snaked around her waist. "I heard about your outing last evening. I guess you had a good time."

"I did. And now I'm full of all of the healer's herbal medicine, and my teeth don't hurt even though she told me not to bite down on anything hard just yet, and I'm feeling enough like my old self that I think we should celebrate."

"Oh? And how would you like to do that?"

She rolled over on top of him and tugged at his shirt. "I want to make love to you. Right now. On the floor or on the bed or floating in mid-air, I don't care. I want you."

He smiled. "Are you sure you're up to it?"

She leaned down and kissed his nose. "I'm the one who should ask you that question."

Their lips met and melded together for a long moment. When they separated, he whispered, "Oh, I'm up for it."

And to prove it, he lifted them both slowly from the floor. She tugged his shirt off as he worked on her sleeping shift, and they both shed the boxers.

And Lois surprised both of them with her energy.

Aella thought she heard something from inside the room. She pulled her fighting knife and reached for the door before she recognized the sounds.

The other guard reacted with alarm. "Is the Lady being attacked? Is she in danger?"

Aella felt her cheeks grow warm and she sheathed her blade. "No, Tania. If there is any attacking going on in there, I believe the Lady Lois is the aggressor. And she is in danger only of tiring herself."

Tania frowned. "But should we not investigate?"

"Tania, she is in the room with Superman. If anyone is able to defeat him, it is unlikely that we would have a chance to help her. Besides," Aella added with a sly grin, "I believe that the Lady Lois can best Superman any time she wishes to do so."

Tania frowned for a moment longer, then her eyebrows rose and her mouth fell open. "Oh!" she blurted. "Then they are — they — oh, my!"

Aella returned to her station and assumed a ready pose.

After a moment, she felt Tania's eyes on her. She turned to meet the other woman's gaze and held it for a long moment before they both burst out in embarrassed laughter.

Epione approached Lois' door and reached out to open it when one of the guards said, "With respect, Healer, we advise you to make your approach known to the Lady Lois before entering."

Epione frowned slightly. "Oh? Why is that?"

"I do not know," answered the guard. "Aella herself asked us to pass that message on to you."

"Did she say anything else?"

"No."

The other guard said, "But she and Tania chuckled as they left. Something amused them both."

Epione shrugged. "Very well. Please announce me."

The second guard pulled out her knife and gently tapped the door with the pommel. "Lady Lois? Healer Epione is here and wishes to speak with you."

There was no answer from within, so the guard tapped harder this time. "Lady Lois?" she called. "Are you awake? The healer is here and wishes to speak with you."

"Mmmff?" said a female voice from inside the room.

The guard shook her head, apparently puzzled. "Lady Lois? Are you well?"

"What? Oh — yeah, I'm just fine!"

A series of giggles, some female and some male, were heard from inside the room. Epione smiled and nodded in understanding. Her patient was indeed feeling much better.

"Lady Lois, this is Healer Epione. Should I return later this morning?"

"What? Oh, no, just a — hang on a second!" She said something Epione didn't catch, then giggled again. A brief 'whoosh' was audible outside the door, then Lois called out, "Okay, Healer, come on in!"

The guard — who had finally realized what had been going on in the room and whose face had by this time turned almost scarlet — reached out and opened the door without looking inside the room. As Epione entered, she heard the other guard snort in a highly amused and very unprofessional manner.

As she looked at her patient and the hero sitting on the bed next to each other, though, she decided that she would not officially report either of the guards. Telling the story later — quite unofficially, of course — to Phillipus or Clio, however, was something she planned to enjoy.

Had she not already known that these two people loved each other deeply, she would have instantly read it in their faces and in their posture. Lois' un-bandaged hand was cradled gently in Superman's mighty one, and they surely did not know that they were leaning toward each other and that they were breathing almost in unison. Their faces were lit with the afterglow of unrestrained love and passion.

The patient was feeling much better, Epione thought. As was her husband.

And the love with which their faces fairly shone made Epione yearn for the company of her own mate. Perhaps she could visit Leonard on the Isle of Husbands. It was not yet time for their scheduled visit, but perhaps their relationship could do with a bit of spontaneity.

Those thoughts, however pleasant, were for another time and place. She put them on a nearby shelf in her mind, where she might easily fetch them back again, and smiled at her patient and her patient's husband. "Good morning, my lady, Superman. I need to examine Lady Lois, but I suspect that she is feeling much better today."

Lois' eyes shone as she nodded and smiled even wider. "You got that right."

Epione held back her smile as Superman blushed slightly. "Then allow me to complete my examination, and we may then attend the hearing for the Princess."

"The hearing?" asked Superman.

The healer lifted Lois' injured hand and softly manipulated it. "Yes. Diana must appear before the queen and her court to answer for the things she has done. And not only the things she has done to the two of you. There are rumors of charges of treason and conspiracy being bandied about, and she does not appear to have many friends left."

Lois' smile had turned upside down. "Do we have to go?"

Epione shook her head and moved to Lois' bandaged shoulder. "Neither of you is required to attend. Indeed, by our own laws we cannot compel you to do so. But the queen has requested that you be available to testify, Lois, and you also, Superman, concerning her attempt to attract her desired mate. And I understand that this testimony would be quite useful in determining her fate." She leaned back and said, "Please lift your injured ankle."

"What kind of sentence is possible?" asked Superman.

She began unwrapping the leaves and vines from Lois' leg. "Almost anything. If it can be proven that she was leading a conspiracy to violently overthrow the queen, a sentence of death is possible but is not likely. I suspect that she will be banished for a few years and forbidden to conceive for that period of time. She might even be removed from the line of succession, although such an outcome is only slightly more likely than a sentence of death."

Epione deliberately did not look at either her patient or her patient's husband as they silently discussed her suggestion. She softly poked and gently twisted Lois' foot until she saw that they had come to a decision.

"Lady Lois, your ankle seems to be healing properly. I will replace the bandage on it, and I advise you to retain it until tomorrow morning. After that, if you refrain from running or climbing for a week, it should be fine."

"How about her hand and shoulder?"

"Ah, yes. The shoulder is coming along well, although I recommend not lifting anything with that arm for a week. And I see no nerve damage in the hand, either. You were most fortunate in that regard. When you return to your home, Lady Lois, I suggest that you visit your own physician and devise a plan of exercise and therapy to rebuild the flexibility and strength in your shoulder and hand."

"I will. And thank you, Epione."

She smiled at the couple and sat back. "I am on my way to the hearing. Have you chosen to accompany me?"

They glanced at each other, apparently for mutual support or confirmation — or both — and nodded. "We're

coming with you,” answered Lois.

Chapter Fifteen

Epione led the little procession to the palace. Behind her, hand in hand, walked Clark and Lois. Two paces behind them and one pace further out strode the two guards, with halberds raised in guard position and their heads on swivels, alert for any Amazon dumb enough to attack Superman. Clark also kept watch, although he did his best to walk tall and to appear unconcerned. He knew Lois would not show any apprehension, so he wouldn't either.

They entered through a different doorway, one which led to a much smaller room than the throne room. On one side, the queen and several of her advisors sat behind an ornate table. In front of the queen, who was seated in the middle of the table, was a plain chair made of thick pieces of wood. To Clark's farm-trained eye, it looked to have been cobbled together out of leftover scraps.

The guards stopped at the door, where four others in fancy livery joined the group. Epione led the couple to adjoining chairs across the room from the table and to the queen's left. She motioned for them to sit, then took a chair directly in front of them. No one else sat near them.

The queen lifted a sculpted stone and struck it against the table. “The royal court is now in session,” she intoned. “May truth be the goal of all those gathered here today. And may justice be done.”

The Amazons in the room echoed back, “May justice be done.” Clark leaned over to Lois to whisper something about his hopes that truth would indeed be found, but she shushed him before he could speak.

He straightened as Clio, the royal scribe, stood behind Hippolyta. “Amazons,” she called out, “and honored guests, there is but one matter set before us today. We will discover the truth of the intentions of Diana, Princess of Themyscira. And we will dispense justice according to our laws.”

The association of Diana, Princess of Themyscira, and Diana Prince, PR flack for the Greek embassy, finally hit Clark. He finally understood how Wonder Woman could disappear into the city so easily. Chagrined, he pressed his lips together, thinking that her having a secret identity was too obvious for him to miss, yet he had. He wondered when Lois had figured it out.

Then a door opened at the side of the room. Diana walked in slowly, burdened by golden chains joining her hands in front of her and her feet with a short length. There was also a chain fastened between the handcuffs and the leg chain. Guess they're afraid she'll run, Clark mused.

It could have been a scene in a Metropolis courtroom. The only things missing were the orange jumpsuit and cheap slippers usually worn by jail inmates.

Diana shuffled to the rough chair in the middle of the room and plopped down. Her hair was pulled back in some kind of clip, and under her chains she wore a plain white shift that covered her shoulders and fell just below her knees. She still bore some of the marks of her recent battle, but she appeared to be doing at least as well as Lois was. But her head was still high and her eyes were bright and piercing. She still carried herself like royalty.

There was a tiny, tiny part of him which admired Diana's courage and determination. Of course, that part was

completely overwhelmed by the memory of Diana being the cause of Lois' injuries.

He decided that if she were on fire he wouldn't spit on her to put it out.

Or maybe that he would.

The queen stood. “This is Diana, Princess of Themyscira, next in line for the throne, and my eldest daughter, whose actions are on trial today. I do not relish being a part of these proceedings. I have offered to step down from my post as judge should any of my people believe that I might not be fair and impartial in my judgment today. My closest advisors have all agreed that I should retain my position in this court, but I wish to know the will of my people. If there are any here — and that includes my daughter and any of her co-conspirators — who do not believe that I am able to judge the Princess' case on its merit, without regard for my relationship with her, let her speak now. Your voice will be heard, none will be offended by it, and none will suffer for it. We seek only justice, not vengeance.”

She stood straight and tall and silent for a long moment. The only sounds Clark heard were the people in the court breathing, a few sandals scuffing against the floor, and Lois' heartbeat. He focused on the heartbeat, strong and steady and regular as clockwork, and he relaxed.

No one spoke. “Very well,” said Hippolyta. “I will begin the hearing by questioning my daughter.”

She reached down beside her chair and picked up a stiff coil of silver rope. “This is my own Lasso of Truth,” she said. “I will use this to gain the truth from all who are questioned here today.”

She shook out a loop and swung it once, then tossed it. The loop settled around Diana's shoulders and the queen tugged it tight enough to make it stay put, but not hard enough to pull the Princess out of the chair.

“I will now ask you, Diana of Themyscira, are you a princess of the royal blood?”

Diana gritted her teeth and answered, “You know that I am.”

“Are you currently in the line of succession?”

“Yes. I am next in line, pending the birth of my first daughter.”

“And had you chosen a mate for yourself on your recent journey to the outside world?”

“Yes,” she growled. “I thought I had found the ideal mate for an Amazon princess.”

The queen took a deep breath. “Yet you later discovered something which interfered with your plans, did you not?”

Diana shuddered, apparently trying to resist, but after a moment she spoke. “That is correct.”

“What did you discover?”

“That — that he was already married.”

“Is it your understanding that an Amazon princess should attempt to bear a child by a man who is already married?”

Diana gritted her teeth, then shuddered and breathed out, “No.”

“What did you do next?”

The princess lifted her head and took a deep breath. “I arranged for the Queen to allow the Challenge of the

Wiles.”

Hippolyta’s expression didn’t change, but Clark thought that her face lost some color as Diana spoke.

“Did you intend that this challenge be the ancient challenge or the modern one?”

“The ancient one.”

“The ancient challenge, in which the contest would be concluded by the death of one of the contestants?”

“Yes.”

“Was the queen aware of this?”

“No.” Diana’s eyes flashed. “You were so easily fooled.”

For the first time, the queen’s voice took on an edge. “You admit that you deliberately deceived the queen of Themyscira?”

“Of course. You would not have allowed the ancient challenge had you known that was what I intended.” Diana surged to her feet and stood as tall and straight as her bindings allowed. “You are weak, Mother! You seek to deal with the outside world from a position of submission and fear! I would deal with them from our strength and our power! They would not find us easy to defeat!”

“No, my daughter, I suppose they would not. On the other hand, however, you were not able to defeat the outsider woman whom you kidnapped to fight.”

Diana’s head snapped around as if she’d forgotten that Lois was in the room. Her resolve seemed to crumble and she slipped back down in the chair, still looking at Lois. “That — that was an error on my part. I was not in harmony with the ancient laws when I did that. I admit to this crime and waive any defense of it.”

“And was the outsider woman’s husband aware of the Challenge?”

Diana turned to her mother and blinked, but didn’t answer.

Hippolyta’s fist tightened on her lasso and Diana flinched again. “No! He — he was not aware of the Challenge!”

“He was not informed? Despite the portion of the ancient law concerning the Challenge of the Wiles which required that he be aware of both the contest itself and its consequences?”

Diana turned back to Lois again. Clark thought she was pleading for understanding. “No,” admitted Diana. “He was not informed. In this, I also admit that I was not in harmony with the ancient laws.”

Clark looked at Lois, but her eyes were fixed on Diana as if they were somehow communicating mentally. He heard a rustle and several angry murmurs from the members of the court, along with some apparent dismayed comments from the spectators, but Hippolyta quieted them with a single word.

“Amazons.” The room went silent. “We have not finished our business here.” She adjusted her grip on her silver rope and said, “Princess Diana, we have not heard you name your co-conspirators. The court requires you to do so now.”

Diana looked back to the queen and stiffened again, apparently resisting the compulsion to tell the truth. “I — I — ask that — I be permitted — to do this in — in private

session.” Then a sob burst from her lips and she all but shouted, “Mother! Please! Do not shame me thus!”

Hippolyta’s eyes filled and she ducked her head for a moment. “This is a painful moment for me. My eldest daughter stands accused of treason against our nation. She also stands accused of plotting to take the throne before the natural succession takes place. She has already admitted to the forceful abduction of Lois Lane from her homeland.”

The queen lifted her head and ignored the tear which crept down her cheek. “As a mother, I cannot countenance any harm coming to my child, no matter her age or her offense. But my duty as queen supersedes my duty as a mother.”

Her voice sharpened and she barked, “Diana! Tell us the names of the Amazons who plotted with you! And tell us also the roles which they played!”

For a moment, Diana vibrated in the chair, resisting, then cried out in pain and anguish. “Enough! Enough, Mother! I will tell all!”

And she did.

And Clark almost wanted to cry for her.

Lois tried to summon some modicum of understanding, some measure of compassion for Wonder Woman, but she couldn’t. Lois had been kidnapped and beaten almost to death, and all because she was married to the greatest man in the world. She’d been in danger before, but those times had been due to her pursuit of justice. This time, she was just unlucky to have been so lucky that Clark loved her.

And it struck her, as she listened to Diana detail the surprisingly small circle of co-plotters she’d used, that Clark had stayed by Lois the whole time. She still didn’t remember his arrival to stop the fight, but she’d been told that he’d ignored Diana after he’d knocked her down and that he’d cradled Lois tenderly and insisted that she get the best care possible or the entire island would suffer the consequences. He’d slept beside her sickbed. He’d sat and held her hand as she’d either slept or groaned in pain, especially those first few days. And the only time he’d seen Diana was when he’d told her, in no uncertain terms, that there was nothing between them, would never be anything between them, and that she was never to set foot in Metropolis again as long as he lived.

Dummy! she thought. The big lug loves me! And it doesn’t matter why or whether I think I deserve him or not! It just matters that he does!

She sat back and relaxed for the first time since they’d entered the courtroom. She’d beaten Wonder Woman after all.

In truth, it really hadn’t been a contest. Not ever. And now Lois finally understood why.

She might not deserve Clark’s love, but she had it. She always had and she always would. And it didn’t matter whether or not Lois felt like she was the best woman for him. That’s what he believed, and that was what really mattered.

She sighed and smiled to herself, then put her uninjured hand around his arm and leaned her head on his mighty shoulder. It was okay, she told herself. Everything was going to be okay.

Diana's testimony was complete. Each of the named conspirators had been brought before the court and given the opportunity to testify in her own defense. Each one of them had declined the chance, had admitted her guilt, and had agreed to accept the court's decision without appeal to the Court of Nine. The queen and her court had met briefly in a side room, then returned to announce the sentences for each conspirator.

To Clark's relief, none of them would die for their roles in the aborted revolution.

A shaken and exhausted Diana was escorted out of the courtroom to begin her banishment. Four others would be incarcerated with her, and as many as a dozen more would receive some sort of punishment for their part in the plot.

Clark regretted the punishments, but he thought that banishment to the northernmost island of Themyscira for various periods of time was far kinder than many sovereigns might have decreed.

Of course, Diana might prefer execution to serving twenty-five years of almost solitary confinement and permanent removal from the line of succession, not to mention that any daughter she might bear would also be excluded from the throne. It was a steep fall from her previous position, and Clark hoped she might do something constructive with her life when she was released.

And despite his unfamiliarity with the Amazon culture, he detected a definite change in the attitude of the spectators. Some had been cautiously supportive of Diana at the beginning of the trial, some had been open supporters of the queen, and about half had seemed to be waffling between the two. But after Diana had admitted her failure to fully follow the ancient laws she claimed to support, the mood in the courtroom had shifted to open condemnation. He had overheard two quiet apologies from one Amazon to another, and one offer of surrender to the court for supporting the budding coup. That Amazon had been quietly escorted out of the room.

Once all of the sentences had been pronounced, Hippolyta slumped in her chair behind the table. Phillipus leaned over and put her hand on the queen's arm, then whispered something in her ear. They both glanced in Clark's direction, then Hippolyta nodded.

Phillipus stood. "Superman, the queen has requested that I complete this hearing in her name. We — that is, the entire nation of Themyscira — officially offer our apologies to both you and your wife for the injustice done to you. We also offer our continued medical assistance to Lois Lane as long as she desires it. And we wish to permanently establish that you, Superman, are permitted to walk among us anywhere at any time."

He leaned close to his wife. "Do we officially accept their apology?" he whispered.

She looked over the women behind the table, then turned and whispered, "I think we should, yes."

"Any other thoughts? They look like they're waiting for some response."

She frowned in thought for a moment, then whispered, "I'm taking them up on their offer of medical assistance. I can't believe I'm healing this fast."

"Me neither. Although I'm really glad of it." He sighed. "Maybe they have something that will make your hair grow back faster."

She gave him a quiet smile. "I'm just glad I still have a head where it can grow back. Now talk noble to them. You're so much better at that than I am."

He stood and took a breath. "We thank you for your apology. And we formally accept it. We are also willing to accept your offer of continued medical assistance for Lois. I am very glad that she is healing so quickly, and I'd like to thank the healer Epione for her skill and her care."

Phillipus' face softened as if she were relieved. "Thank you, Superman. And thank you, Lois Lane. We offer the two of you our hospitality for as long as you wish to claim it."

Lois called out, "That's very nice of you, but if it's all the same to you I'd rather go home."

Hippolyta snorted a very un-queenly laugh, and the rest of the Amazons displayed various degrees of amusement. "We understand your desire, Ms. Lane," answered Phillipus. "We ask only that you discuss your departure with Epione to make certain you are well enough to travel."

"Oh, I will, don't worry."

Clark smiled and reached for his wife's hand, then said, "Is there anything else you need from us, Chancellor?"

Phillipus shook her head. "No. We thank you for attending this hearing, despite its painful nature. We had to be certain that the Princess gave factual testimony."

Lois stood beside her husband and nodded. "As far as what happened between the princess and me, she didn't lie about anything."

"Thank you, Ms. Lane. This hearing is now adjourned. Rest well, all."

Hippolyta stood and made eye contact with Clark. "Lois, I think the queen wants to talk to us privately. How tired are you?"

"Not that tired. Let's do it."

Lois didn't like being the one who got waited on, but Clark insisted and Perry backed him up. So she sat on the love seat in the living room, outwardly as docile as a pet mouse, and waited as her husband brought her a coffee refill.

"So you and Superman didn't have to testify?" asked Perry.

She shook her head. "They just wanted us there as insurance, I guess. And to let us know that they wanted their proceedings to be transparent to us. No secret trials, no conditional sentences, nothing like that."

"What happened next?"

"We went into a side chamber — thanks, Clark, cream and two sugars this time, please — to talk to Hippolyta and some of her advisors. I thought they just wanted to apologize again, but instead they asked Superman to do them a huge favor."

Perry sipped his coffee. "And the queen wanted Superman to do what, exactly?"

Clark sighed. "She wanted Superman to work directly with the new ambassador from Themyscira to establish relations between them and the United States."

"I take it that Superman said no?"

“Not quite, Perry,” said Lois. “He told them that he wasn’t associated with any government and had no legal standing to assume such a position. But he did tell them that he could set up a meeting with the State Department — a secret one if that’s what the Amazons wanted — to discuss formal relations.”

The editor sat back on the couch. “So what do they plan to do?”

“Superman is going back there tomorrow evening to pick up their formal request for diplomatic relations and deliver it to one of our contacts in State. Clark and I have the exclusive on that story, by the way. And he’s going to report to Epione on my progress.”

“Epione is their doctor, right?”

“More a holistic folk healer than a doctor,” answered Clark, “but she’s very good. Except for Lois’ hair, in another week she won’t have any physical evidence of her little visit to Paradise Island.”

Perry nodded, then fixed her with a fierce glare. “I’m glad you’re doing so well, Lois. But I absolutely don’t want to see you in the office until your own doctor here in Metropolis gives you the all-clear. You hear me?”

“You got it, Chief. I’ll wait for Dr. Klein to give me the thumbs-up.”

Both Perry and Clark stared at her for a long moment, then Perry said, “What did you just say?”

She chuckled. “I know, I know. Five years ago I would have argued with both of you to let me jump back in the saddle again as soon as I could stand up. But I’m almost thirty-five now, and I’m just not as young as I used to be.”

“None of us are, darlin’.” Perry leaned forward and set his cup down. “Speaking of which, I think it might be time to give our heroine here a little promotion.”

Clark smiled. Lois frowned and said, “What kind of promotion?”

“Well, I’m not as young as I used to be either, and Alice has been telling me that she wants me to hang around the house for a lot of years, and she’s worried that I’ll work myself into an early grave, so between us we’ve created the position of associate editor-in-chief. The person who fills this slot would do some of the things I’ve been doing for the past twenty years and more, and eventually would take over for me. I think it’s getting close to time for me to retire for real.”

Lois’s eyebrows rose to astronomical heights. “And — and you want me to — you think I should —”

Clark leaned over and kissed her gently on the side of her head. “I think it’s a fantastic idea, Perry. When does she start?”

“Hey! I haven’t said ‘yes’ yet!”

Perry and Clark laughed together, then Perry stood. “You two talk it over and let me know what you think. Let’s see, this is Monday evening, so if you can get back to me by Friday mid-day, we can set the wheels in motion. Assuming, of course, Ms. Lane, that this is the career path you’d like to follow.”

Lois nodded slowly. “I’ll definitely think about it.”

“Thanks, darlin’. That’s all I can ask.”

Clark looked at his wife and asked, “Shall we tell him about their family setup?”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Why not? He won’t believe it any more than I do.”

Perry lifted an eyebrow. “What about their family setup?”

Clark shook his head. “It’s a little complicated. You know that their laws say that men aren’t allowed on the island, right?” Perry nodded. “Well, that’s just the main island. There’s another smaller land mass about half a mile north-east where the Husbands’ Village is. All the men live and work there.”

Perry’s eyes bloomed and he leaned forward. “They what?”

Lois shook her head and made a rude noise. Clark ignored her and continued his story. “The men live in individual houses, most of them made of stone to withstand the occasional hurricane. They have their own ruling council, their own farms and crafts and shops, and they’re just about self-sufficient. The only restriction is that they can’t leave.”

“Not ever?”

“I said you wouldn’t believe it, Perry,” Lois put in. “The men have their own island and their own little society, and their wives have a regular visitation schedule. There are even a couple of huts down on the north beach where they can go and be alone together.”

Perry shook his head. “And that’s the only time they — I mean, they don’t get to — there’s no — they don’t have — relations — except on a schedule?”

Clark grinned. “I know. I couldn’t hold it together if I only saw Lois for three or four days out of the month. But it works for them, and the guys I talked to said that it wasn’t ideal, but it was as good as some of the marriages they’d seen in their own countries.”

Perry shrugged. “Oh, well, if it works for them, it works for them. Hey, wait a minute! Where did all these guys come from?”

Lois put her cup down on the table. “A few of them are the sons of Amazons, but most of them are from South America or West Africa. A few are from Europe, some from the US, and I swear I saw one little girl who was part Japanese.”

“Huh. Interesting. How many of the Amazons have husbands?”

“A little more than half,” replied Clark. “Some of them just leave the island, find a man they like and seduce him and come back to have the baby, but most of them get married. The ones who don’t marry aren’t cast out of Amazon society, but they are viewed as having made the second best choice.”

Perry nodded. “You know, those folks are gonna make some sociologist very famous.” He glanced at his watch. “Whoops. Time for me to saddle up and head out. Thanks for the coffee, folks.”

Clark stood and walked Perry to the door. “Thanks, Chief. And, uh, thanks for letting the Wonder Woman story come out the way it did.”

The editor stopped and turned to face him. “We can’t go around bad-mouthing super-powered people in the news unless they deserve it. Last thing I want the Daily Planet to be is a gossip rag about the spandex crowd.”

“I still think you should have published the truth about

the princess,” Lois growled from the living room. “We didn’t have to tell everyone that she’d been called home to deal with ‘pressing government issues.’”

“If she hadn’t been dealt with by her own people, I would’ve led the crusade against her myself. But it wouldn’t help anyone to do that now, and it would just get in the way of normalizing relations with those folks.” Perry chuckled ruefully. “I just hope they understand what kind of bear trap they’re stickin’ their heads into. Every country on the planet will want that cloaking technology. And who knows what else they have that folks will want?”

“Hippolyta wants to approach the U.S. first to establish a mutual defense pact,” said Clark. “She thinks that will protect them long enough to convince the not-so-nice countries to leave them alone.”

“Might work,” offered Perry. “I figure they know how to fight, so anybody dumb enough to attack them might just be grabbin’ a wolverine by the tail. What else do they have to trade with?”

“They have some pretty advanced tactical weaponry that they want to keep to themselves, but I think they plan to offer medical assistance to underdeveloped nations in exchange for favorable trade conditions. Epione mentioned something about training a new generation of healers from other countries. And her eyes lit up like a pair of headlights at midnight when she was talking to me about it.”

“I hope that’s what happens, son. Well, I got to skedaddle on home. Alice is waiting dinner for me. And you two need to call her and set up a time for us to get together, y’hear?”

Clark smiled. “We’ll do it as soon as Lois’ hair grows out a little.”

Perry laughed aloud. “You know, if those Amazons had some kind of hair-restoring somethin’-or-other they’d never have to pay for anything anywhere. Every man in America over thirty-five would be a customer.”

“I’ll ask Superman to mention that next time he goes to see them.”

Perry winked. “Yeah, you make sure he does that. Clark, I’ll see you in the office day after tomorrow. Lois?”

“I’ll be a good girl, Perry! I promise.”

“I know you will. Goodnight, you two.”

Clark closed and locked the door, then returned to Lois. “Are you tired, honey?”

She stretched. “A little. And my shoulder is sore. That physical therapist must have learned her craft from Torquemada.”

He grinned. “Do you want me with you to come to the next torture session?”

“No. I’ll just tell her some jokes to loosen her up.”

He gave her a wary look. “What kind of jokes?”

“Oh, like the one about the sadist and the masochist walking down the street.”

His eyes narrowed. “What about them?”

Her mouth didn’t smile but her eyes did. “Well, the sadist and the masochist were walking down the street together when suddenly the masochist grabbed the sadist and yelled, ‘Hit me! Strike me! Please! Anything, just hurt me!’ and the sadist grinned evilly and said, ‘No. Your therapy session doesn’t start for another forty minutes.’”

Clark snorted, then laughed out loud. Lois joined him.

When their laughter settled, he asked, “What do you think of Perry’s job offer?”

She frowned in concentration. “It might be a very good idea at that. We’re both too well-known to do undercover work any more, and even straight investigative reporting is getting harder because of our reputations. People who have things they want to hide don’t want to talk to either of us, and especially not together.”

“That’s true. But the editor’s chair takes up even more time and puts pressure on whoever is sitting in it.”

She gave him a raised eyebrow combined with a sideways grin. “I assume you talked to Perry about this offer before he brought it up.”

“I did. But I did not assume your answer. If you want my input on this decision, I’ll give it to you. And if you decide to start teaching Yi Chi at Lin’s martial arts studio, that’s okay with me too.”

“You mean it’ll keep me out of trouble.”

“No.” He put his hand on her knee. “I mean that whatever you want to do with your life is fine with me, as long as we’re together. If teaching Yi Chi makes you happy, great. If sitting in the editor’s chair makes you happy, that’s great too. If you want to quit working altogether and be a housewife, I’ll back you on that, too.” He let a small grin appear. “Although, if I were a betting man, I don’t think I’d put money on that horse.”

They laughed together for a moment, then Clark took his wife’s hands in his. “Oh, Lois, I’m so very glad you’re okay. I don’t think I could have survived losing you.”

She smiled at him. “You could have, Clark. And some day you might have to. I think you’ll probably live a lot longer than I will.”

He dropped his gaze. “I — don’t like to think about that.”

“I know, darling.” She touched his chin and lifted his head with one finger. “But I want you to know that I hope you find someone who will love you and someone you can love after I’m gone.”

His eyes turned shiny. “I don’t think I’ll ever love any woman like I love you.”

She smiled. “I know. And I don’t think you’ll ever find any woman who loves you like I do.” She reached out and tugged him into an embrace. “You are the most wonderful man alive, and I am so lucky to be loved by you.”

He held her close. “And I feel the same about you. I am so blessed to be loved by you. I hope you never doubt that.”

She kissed his earlobe and ran her fingers through his hair. “I won’t ever doubt it, my darling. Not for as long as I live.”

Epilogue

Bernie Klein lifted the clipboard and shook his head. “I’m sorry, Lois, but I just can’t find any problems. You’re as healthy as you’ve ever been.”

“But I don’t feel right, Bernie! I’m eating more and I can’t control my appetite, I’ve gained almost fifteen pounds, I get angry or weepy for no real reason, and I feel like I’m off-balance when I’m doing martial arts. On top of that, a lot of my best clothes don’t quite fit me any more!”

Bernie shook his head again. “Well, I’m still waiting for

that other blood test to come back, but I can't think of anything that might show up." He frowned. "Are you still taking that herbal extract you got from that Amazon healer?"

"I ran out a month ago. She sent me back with a six-week supply and I can't get any more. She told Superman that I don't need it now, and that she doesn't want me to get dependent on it."

"I see. Well, there's nothing else for me to do here. You can take off that exam gown and get dressed now."

Lois waited for a few seconds, then slid off the exam table and looked at him pointedly. "Bernie? Aren't you going to give me some privacy?"

Horrified, the researcher backed up and babbled his apologies, then fumbled to the door and stepped outside. He closed the door and breathed a huge sigh of relief and exasperation, then rubbed his face with one hand. Once again he was reminded why he wasn't in private practice.

When he opened his eyes, Dr. Sarah Potter, research biophysicist at Star Labs, smiled softly as she gave him a thin brown folder. "Here you go, Bernie. And congratulations."

He frowned. "Congratulations? What for?"

She tilted her head to the side, just like she had the last time he'd suspected she'd been teasing him. "I'm sorry. I thought you were doing a test for your lady friend."

"What? Lady friend? Oh, no, no, she's not my — I mean she is my friend, but she's not — I mean she is a lady but — oh, drat! She's someone else's wife, Sarah! I'm just doing this as a favor to both of them!"

"Uh-huh." Sarah leaned closer and tugged on his lapel. "In that case, you should step back when you give her the news."

Before he could figure out how to ask her what she was talking about, Dr. Sarah Potter had turned to walk slowly down the corridor. Her movements made Bernie think of Lauren Bacall walking away from Humphrey Bogart in the movie "To Have And To Hold."

Was Sarah flirting with him?

Even if she wasn't, he decided, he'd flirt with her. "Hey!" he called. "You know how to whistle?"

She flowed to a stop and turned halfway around. Her eyes were half-closed and that soft smile still framed her mouth. "Sure I do. You just put your lips together and blow."

Yep, he thought, that was flirting. Had to be. He hoped it was, anyway.

He decided to go for broke. "Uh — how about I whistle up a cup of coffee for each of us when we get off this afternoon?"

She turned all the way around and put her hand on her hip under her lab coat. "Only if it comes with dinner. We'll go Dutch treat and I pick the place."

He knew he was grinning like a fool but he couldn't help it. "Okay. Meet you at the front gate at six tonight?"

She nodded and eased in her original direction. "It's a date, Bernie. We'll take my car, not your bike. And leave the lab coat behind."

He watched her until she slipped around the corner and vanished from his sight. Wow, he thought, a real date! And with such an attractive and intelligent woman!

He hoped she tolerated motorcycles. And he wondered if she had any pets which weren't lab subjects.

A tap on his shoulder brought him out of his fog. He turned and saw Lois smirking at him. "Did your lady friend bring that final report you were waiting for?"

"What? Oh, she's not my — I mean — now don't start that again!"

Lois' smirk almost grew to be a smile, but she controlled herself. Instead, she pointed at the folder in Bernie's hand and asked, "Is that my report?"

"What?" He'd completely forgotten the folder. "Oh, yes, here, let me have a look."

He flipped open the folder and read the test results. "Oh, my," he said. "Well, that's certainly an unexpected development."

Engrossed as he was in the details of the report, he sort of forgot that Lois was there until she slapped him on the side of the shoulder and knocked him a step to his right. "Lois! Please!"

"Those are my results, Bernie," she growled. "Either tell me what they say or let me read them myself."

"Oh, this is the raw data, Lois. I'm not sure you could —"

"Bernie!" she barked. Then she reached behind her, pushed the door open, and grabbed his tie to pull him back into the examining room. "Tell me what it says!"

"Uh. Okay." He adjusted his glasses and took a deep breath. "It seems that my conclusion concerning Superman's compatibility with a human female was incorrect. I suspect that this has something to do with the herbal medicines from —"

Lois grabbed his lapels and yanked his face down to hers. "Bernie!" she snarled. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"You didn't — oh, right, you see, that's why I'm not in private practice. Terrible at patient relationships. I only meant to tell you that you're pregnant."

Her face paled and her grip on his lab coat loosened. For a moment he thought she'd faint, but then she leaped up and threw her arms around his neck and nearly strangled him.

So that's why Sarah told me to step back, he thought as his eyes lost focus and his lungs labored in vain.

"Oh!" she cried. "Bernie! Are you sure? I mean, sometimes the test is positive but it's a false positive and that would just be so cruel and I want to make sure I really am before I tell anyone so maybe you could run the test again just to be sure —"

"Gaahhkkk!"

"What? Oh, Bernie, I'm so sorry!" She eased up on the pressure but didn't let go. "Can you run the test again just to be sure? Please?"

"Sarah — ran it three times — already," he croaked. "We're as sure — as we can be — without an — an ultrasound!"

Her grip closed in on his windpipe again. "Oh, Bernie, I'm so happy! Thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you!"

He tugged ineffectually on her elbow until she got the message. When she finally released him, he stumbled back a step and took a deep breath. "Lois!" he panted. "Please

don't do that again, now that I have so much to live for!"

Her eyes glowed and her smile threatened to split her face. "Oh, Bernie, this is so wonderful!" She grabbed his lapels and yanked him down into a quick but fierce kiss. "Oh! I have to go tell Clark!"

With that, she snatched her purse and coat and vanished out the door, leaving a barometric low-pressure area in her wake.

Bernie straightened his lab coat, smiled, and shook his head. Clark Kent and Lois Lane were two of the finest people he'd ever known. And this was the news they'd wanted to hear for five years. He was glad he'd been the one to tell them.

Even if he'd kind of fumbled it and almost gotten himself asphyxiated.

Hopefully, future historians documenting Superman's life would take pity on him and cut him some slack. After all, he wasn't a married man himself. The emotional inner workings of the female of the species were a greater mystery than the unbalanced ratio of background radiation in the universe versus the amount of dark matter.

Although, if this date with Sarah worked out like he hoped it did, maybe there was a real chance for him to alter that status. His marital status, that is. Grasping the secrets of the universe was, he felt certain, far simpler than understanding women. The universe, while full of surprises, was consistent once one grasped all the variables.

Human females? Not so much. It was scary.

On the other hand, Sarah was a highly skilled scientist, brilliant in her multiple fields, and both of them were unattached. If he could figure out which cards to play, and when to play them, they might just have a mutual romantic relationship in their futures.

After all, no one knew what the future might bring. It might even bring something wonderful.

THE END