

# Clark and Lois — Despair to Hope — Matchmaker Chronicle Volume 4

By Ken Janney <ken.janney@kjanney.com>

Rated PG13

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Summary: This is the second story in the “Clark and Lois arc”; it follows “Lost Years.” When Alt Lois was shot by the rebel, there were two possible outcomes: 1) she lived, 2) she died. In this story we return to the Alt canon universe where Lois died. As he tries to cope with her death, a chance remark by a friend reminds Alt Clark that there are many Lois Lanes in the multi-verse. Clinging to this hope, with Herb’s help Alt Clark embarks on a series of missions to other universes while the resources of TTEMPO search for a Lois without a Clark.

Warning: This story has adult situations. There is an nfc version in the nfc folder.

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

Authors note:

This is the fourth part of a multi part saga and a direct sequel to Clark and Lois — The Lost Years — Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 3. If you haven’t done so as yet, please read the previous Volumes. You will have a better understanding of the fundamental premises of the set if you do. I wish to express my thanks to my Beta readers Ray Reynolds and Artemis for their invaluable help. I also wish to especially thank Datasprite12 for her invaluable help in correcting my elementary French. This was a VERY rough draft when it first landed in their hands.

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

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

These are all volumes of a single story loop. I expect to be publishing a goodly number of volumes so hang on, it’s gonna be a fun ride.

\* \* denotes emphasis

<> denotes thoughts

(#) footnotes

/ denotes telepathic communication/

[ *playback of a recording or TV Commentary* ]

For reference purposes the following will hold true throughout.

Universal Locator Designation

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

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

Also, please read the end notes.

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

Clark and Lois — Despair to Hope

The Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 4

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**Prologue — From The Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 3**  
*Clark and Lois — The Lost Years*

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**Chapter 15 — Captured**

May 22, 1992

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036

Local designation — Alt 1

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After nearly a week on the trail the sounds of the normal jungle chorus had become a comforting familiar background to the day. However, the sounds of the jungle chorus were not as pronounced this morning. As awareness slowly returned and sleep became a thing of the past they looked at each other across the by now oh-so-familiar tent. Slowly the realization of the cause of the change impinged on their awareness. The jungle sounds were being muted primarily by the sounds of the rain, which was falling onto the tent.

Still feeling somewhat self-conscious as she sat up, Lois clutched her sleeping bag to her breast. Charlie sat up also and they looked at each other. Each had a somewhat disgusted look on their face. Lois was the first to voice her discontent. “How dare it rain! Things have been just fine until now. We were almost finished with this.”

“I take it you don’t feel like hiking in the rain.”

“You take it right. It’s bad enough lugging that pack around when it’s hot and humid but in the rain! I don’t think so.”

“Okay, it’s just as well. Because of this rain we’ll have to let them pass us. If we didn’t then we’d be leaving prints on the trail and they would know we were there. Hungry?”

“Yeah, but make it something that we don’t have to go outside to prepare or eat.”

Charlie rummaged around in his pack and came up with some granola bars. “Honey nut or chocolate almond? As if I really need to ask.” He was laughing as he was saying this and he extended the chocolate almond bar out for her to grab. Which she did, smiling her thanks as she did so.

“You know me pretty well, don’t you?”

“I’m learning all the time.”

They munched on their granola bars for a couple of minutes in silence, then Lois asked a question. “Charlie, do you like me?”

Somewhat taken aback by this question, Charlie answered, “Lois, you don’t know how much.”

With a raised eyebrow and her wicked little grin evident, she asked, “Are you attracted to me sexually?”

Embarrassed now, he stammered, “Well, yeah, uh, yes, uh, yes, yes I am. Wh ... why do you ask?”

“I thought you were. Why are you embarrassed about it? Why do you try to hide it from me?”

Still more than a little bit embarrassed he responded, “I, uh, well, ah, it,” He cleared his throat and started again. “Uh it would have ah, added a, ah, an unnecessary level, uh, level of complexity to, to our relationship, uh, right now. We are here on a job and ... and we need to see it finished.”

Enjoying his embarrassment more than a little bit, she continued, “I know we’re here on a job and we’re nearly finished with it, so, why don’t you tell me how you feel?”

A look of resolution came over his face as he said, “Lois, I’d like to, but there are some things that need to be worked out first.” <Like are you going to live or die. I’m here to make sure you live, but what if I fail? If she is going to die is it fair to her to let her know how I feel? But if she is going to die is it fair to her to \*not\* let her know how I feel? I don’t know which would be the right thing to do!> “Right now we both need to have clear heads without the confusion of wondering exactly where we are going in this relationship. I’ll say that I’m looking for permanence and that I hope you are too.”

“Charlie, I’ve known for some time that you’re attracted to me sexually. You haven’t been able to hide it even though you’ve tried. A long time ago I made a decision that I wasn’t going to let myself get involved in any kind of relationship again because I had been hurt so much in the past. So for the longest time my job has been my life. I’ve been hurt too many times and I just wasn’t going to let it happen again.” This last was said with a small almost inaudible sob.

She continued, with a little catch in her throat and a hint of unshed tears. “Since we’ve been together I’ve started thinking that I made a mistake. When I made that decision, it was the safe choice. Stay safe, don’t get involved and don’t put your heart out there for it to be trampled on again. But can anyone really live that way?” Her voice started to pick up some animation and the pain faded into the background. “In the last couple of months, with you, I’ve had a glimpse of what it could be like. This time with you has opened my eyes to what life could be like with the right person. My job doesn’t have to \*be\* my life; it can be just a \*part\* of it. Being with you, working with you, we’ve shared the responsibilities, shared ideas and shared the non-work, personal time. I now see that that was what was really missing in my life. I wasn’t really living, I was barely existing. What I was missing was someone to share the personal time with. We are on the job, sure, but we’ve been working \*together\*, as a \*team\* not just as \*two individuals\* and I’ve been seeing just what I’ve been missing all these years by working alone. Where have you been all my life? If I had had you around so many things would have been different. Because I’m the best I have the respect of other reporters, but I’m starting to see that that isn’t enough. I have plenty of people that respect me, but no one to love me. I have their respect, but after work I go home to an empty apartment. I order take out, work some more and go to bed, alone. The next day the cycle repeats itself. That’s not life ... it’s existence ... and a poor one at that. I don’t have anyone to share with when things aren’t going right or to celebrate with for the little victories.”

“Lois, we’re together in this and I hope that we can stay together but we need to get through the rest of this before we can be sure. If I didn’t know just how much this investigation meant

to you, I’d suggest that we pack up and just head back right now and say ‘to hell with it’. That would be the safe way. That would be the sure way. There are still some unknowns, too many unknowns. We could die tomorrow no matter how much I try to prevent it. History seems reluctant to change sometimes. But I would be willing to cheat history, or fate if you want to call it that, if it meant that you would be safe and we could be together, but could you live with that?”

With a quizzical expression, she asked, “History? Fate? What do history and fate have to do with it?”

“Your history, my history, our history — somewhere it’s already been written. Good, bad or indifferent it’s there. I can only hope that it isn’t cast in stone. I pray that it isn’t because if it is I don’t know if I’ll be able to go on.”

“Charlie, you’re scaring me.” She pushed back the top cover of the sleeping bag to reveal that all she had on was her bra and panties. She got up from her bag and moved over to Charlie’s bag. He raised the flap so that she could join him inside and she lay down next to him. “Hold me, Charlie. I just want you to hold me for a while. I’m not suggesting anything else. Some of the things you have been saying have left me feeling unsure of how things will turn out and I need you to hold me.”

As Charlie wrapped her up in his arms she snuggled up to him. “Charlie, why do I feel so comfortable with you? We’ve only known each other for a couple of months, but I feel like I’ve known you forever. When I’m in your arms like this I feel safe and secure and protected and content and ... I feel like I don’t ever want you to let me go!”

He started stroking her hair and pushed an errant strand back behind her ear. “Lois, I don’t want to let you go and when we get past this you’ll find out just how much. If we make it through this I’ll explain everything, I promise.”

They drifted into silence, each occupied with their own thoughts.

The warmth of their bodies inside his sleeping bag, the comfort of the closeness and the sound of the rain on the tent had a soporific effect and Lois fell asleep in Charlie’s arms. A contented smile graced his features as he watched her sleep. She had been on her side as they had been talking and had rolled over on her back with her head pillowed on his right forearm when she fell asleep. He half rolled so that he could look more directly at her while she slept. <Is it right to not tell her how I feel? How much harm could that do? What if something does happen and I never told her? Could I forgive myself? I have to tell her.> In a half whisper, so as not to disturb her slumber, he answered all of her questions. “Actually, Lois, I more than like you; I love you with \*all\* my heart and I long to tell you that. It may not be the right thing to do because I want both of us at our peak, so I probably shouldn’t tell you just yet. Am I attracted to you sexually, you bet. I yearn to be with you and in you but that too must wait. I would like nothing better than to cheat fate and just say to hell with this investigation and take you out of here, but that would diminish you in so many ways. If I did that it wouldn’t allow you to be who and what you are and you would hate me for it. I’ve got to see this through with you and do my best to protect you.”

Lois shifted position again. When she finally settled she was lying on her left side. Her right arm was across his chest and her head was pillowed now on his right shoulder. Her right breast was pressing into his ribcage and her right leg was across his thigh with her foot in between his legs. Looking over at her he saw that her hair had fallen across her face so he gently reached over and brushed her hair back, tucking that ever errant strand behind her right ear and let his hand linger, caressing the side of her face. As he did she started mumbling in her sleep, but the only coherent word he could make out was “Charlie”.

“Lois, my love, my life, I promise you, whatever it takes I’m

going to do. If it means compromising my secret, then so be it. My secret is nothing compared to your safety.”

After a while Lois awoke. When she did she was staring into Charlie's dark brown eyes from a distance of about six inches. She said, “Hi.”

“Hi, yourself! Lois, I've been having an argument with myself and I think I've come to a decision. Lois, there's something I need to tell you.”

“Charlie, if you feel it's best not to, then don't.”

“No, I have to be honest with you. Lois, I love you. I've loved you from the first moment we met. I should have told you earlier, but I was afraid of what your response would be. I'm not asking for some declaration from you, I just needed you to know that.”

“Charlie, I thought that was how you felt. You didn't need to hide it from me. It does explain a few things though.”

“You may not feel the same way and I would understand if you didn't, but I had to tell you that.”

“Charlie, I'm not sure yet in my own mind exactly where I am. I'm kind of confused right now, but I'll sort it out before long.” She raised herself up and gave him a kiss.

By the time they finished the rain had stopped and they decided to pack up and move out on the trail of the weapons.

After rolling up their sleeping bags Charlie took down the tent. They repacked everything and grabbed some more granola bars to eat while they hiked. Retracing their steps back to the main trail, they headed out. Charlie knew that they were getting near their destination and mentioned that fact to Lois.

Unknown to Charlie and Lois, a squad of rebels had been detached from the security detail to form a hunting party. The convoy was nearing their destination and they had been detailed to bring in some fresh meat for the camp.

Charlie and Lois were still following the trail left by the bearers, making sure that they were almost out of earshot behind them. This time Charlie was in the lead since that was where the greatest danger lay. They could barely hear the bearers as they sang while carrying their loads.

They were in deep jungle by this time, and it was hard to keep on track. As a result, even with his enhanced senses they were surprised by the squad that had been dispatched as a hunting party. The hunters were returning to the trail after having been in the jungle hunting monkeys.

When they jumped out at them Charlie shouted, “Linda, run! I'll hold them off.”

Lois quickly saw that flight would be useless since they were completely surrounded. “No good, we're going to have to fight!”

With a quick move she shed her pack and took up a defensive stance. Arms up with double sword hands prepared to strike. The rebel nearest her had his rifle slung over his shoulder. Seeing that it was just a woman in front of him, he reached for her.

That was his undoing. As he reached for her she grabbed his right wrist with her right hand and stepped back with her right foot and pulled, forcing him off balance. As he started to fall past her she shifted direction and brought her right knee up into his solar plexus. With a whoosh all of the air was expelled from his lungs and he fell unconscious, the sharp blow causing his heart to skip a few beats. With this adversary down she immediately recovered to a ready stance.

Quickly shedding his pack, Charlie also took up a defensive posture. He had seen that it wasn't going to be any use to try to run even as he had shouted to Lois to do just that. He was hampered by the fact that he couldn't overtly utilize his powers and there were too many of the rebels. He did use some of the martial arts moves that he had learned from the Viet Nam vet and more recently, Lois.

He had really appreciated that time with Vince, the vet. He had been just coming into his powers and learning the martial arts

had taught him a measure of control he didn't think he would have had otherwise. He was able to ‘pull’ his punches so that they looked like those of a ‘normal’ man. He was holding his own and constantly checking on Lois. He was impressed that she was holding her own as well.

For Lois the next attack was not long in coming. Another rebel, seeing what she had done to his friend, came in. But he was somewhat more wary. He pulled a machete from its scabbard at his belt and used this to threaten her. When she didn't appear to back down he came at her. Lifting the blade above his head, he prepared for a downward stroke. If it connected it would cleave her skull in two all the way to the breastbone. As he was coming at her she shifted her stance. She stepped into his movement and under the arc of his arms and assuming a strong stance, she prepared to take the blow. At the last instant before contact she crossed her arms at the forearms, forming a ‘V’.

When the blow came she took the impact at the ‘V’ of her crossed arms, and since she had stepped in under the arc of the blow it was his forearm and not the blade that made the contact. At contact her hands spun around and grabbed his wrist and forearm. She stepped back with her left foot, shifting her balance to that foot and bringing her right leg up and parallel to the ground with her right foot cocked back. When he reached the correct position she released the round kick releasing her chi with the shout, “KKKIIIEEAAAAaaahHH!!”

The impact felt like the ball of her foot had hit a brick wall, but not even a brick and mortar wall could have long stood up to that kind of punishment and his sternum was not brick and mortar. His sternum was shattered and bone fragments were driven deep into his body, several of them piercing his heart. He was dead before he hit the ground. Lois returned to ready looking to see who was going to try her next.

Charlie didn't like it when he saw her kill one of her attackers, but saw that it was done in self-defense so he felt a little better about it. He had watched her movements and knew that she wasn't going to be struck by the blade and that she was going to be able to defeat her attacker. If she were put into real danger he would have done whatever he needed to do to prevent her coming to real harm. As it stood they were in danger of being captured but not mortal danger, that one thug excluded.

He was occupied by two assailants and didn't see it when Lois was herself confronted by a pair, one of which clipped her over the head with his rifle butt. She went down, stunned.

Another of their assailants, apparently the one in command, stepped over her and grabbing a handful of her hair dragged her up in front of him. The pain brought Lois back to consciousness and she let out a moan of pain and confusion.

Holding a handgun to her temple, the squad leader shouted to Charlie, “Stop now or I kill her!” He was speaking a Bantu dialect that Charlie understood, but even if he hadn't, what he saw made it perfectly clear what his meaning was.

Charlie froze. He didn't know what else he could do without revealing what he was. He realized that even at superspeed, with the muzzle of the gun pressed against her temple he couldn't stop the bullet from killing her. If he stopped she wouldn't be in immediate danger, so he stopped and put his hands up. When he did the thug behind him hit him in the back of the head with his rifle butt. Charlie heard the thug grunt with the effort and when the blow fell he rolled with the punch so that the gun butt wouldn't shatter, and fell to the ground pretending to be stunned.

The leader pushed Lois away from him and released her hair as he did so. She fell limply to the ground and the leader shouted, “Tie them both up!” Their arms were promptly tied behind their backs and then they were pulled into a kneeling position side by side.

They watched as the rebels rifled their backpacks and anything they thought was of value they stuffed into their pockets

and the rest was cast aside. The camera was well hidden so it was not found. The roll of film with the pictures already taken had been given to Derek Price for safekeeping before they left port. Only Derek, Linda and Charlie knew it even existed.

The squad leader started to question them. He, too, was speaking in a Bantu dialect. Charlie understood and Lois knew that he understood since he had conversed fluently with the marina owner, but he pretended not to and she went along with the deception. The squad leader saw that he wasn't getting anywhere because of the language barrier. He knew that one of the officers still with the cargo train was semi-fluent in English so the he sent a runner for him so that he could do the questioning.

When he arrived they were still kneeling side by side with several of the rebels covering them with their rifles.

The officer walked up and positioned himself in front of them and then demanded in English, "Who are you and what are you doing here following our cargo train?"

Charlie replied, "We were with a safari group but we got separated from it and we are lost."

With a look of disdain clearly evident on his face, the questioner, Drago, said, "Such a fleemsy lie. There are no safari groups anywhere near the area. You will tell me the truth or else."

With curiosity evident on his face, Drago started looking more closely at them. As he looked closely at Lois a look of dawning recognition slowly came over his face.

"\*You\* are the woman \*from the boat\*! I almost didn't recognize you with your clothes on." Turning to Charlie he said, "and your playmate. The \*two\* of you have been \*following us\* since we left \*Brazzaville\*! \*Why\* do you follow us?"

"We've done nothing to you. Why don't you let us go?" Lois asked wearily.

"You keeled one of my men!"

"It was self-defense; he attacked me with a machete."

"He es steel dead and I should keel you for eet," he said as he fingered and then started to grip his sidearm preparatory to pulling it from its holster.

### Chapter 16 — Linda in Danger

May 22, 1992

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Universal Locator Designation  
Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036  
Local designation — Alt 1

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Charlie was watching Drago's every move. If he attempted to draw and fire, it would be 'secret be damned' — he would act to save Lois.

But Drago took his hand away from his sidearm and asked, "Who are you? Are you with the government in Brazzaville?"

Charlie spoke up to take the attention away from Lois. He thought that if they focused on him there would be less likelihood of any further harm being done to Lois. "No, we are not with your government. We aren't even from the Congo. I'm sure you can tell that from the fact that we don't have French accents. We're Americans."

"What are Americans doing following an arms shipment into the Congo?"

"We're reporters. We're just following up on a story."

"What story?"

"We are trying to find out just who is supplying the arms so that we can put them in jail."

"So, you admit your goal! You are here to stop us from getting the arms we need for the revolution! I should execute both of you on the spot, but the General would want to know just how much you know and who else knows. I need to take you on to the camp."

Drago picked two of his men to accompany them and they set off. They marched the rest of that day, passing the cargo train and proceeding on at a faster pace than the cargo train could maintain. They bedded down on the jungle floor for the night. They kept Linda and Charlie separated and stood guard four by four. They started out again early the next morning.

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May 23, 1992

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Between the trip to the river to pick up the shipment and now on the trip back to camp, they had been on the trail for close to two weeks. Drago's underlings by now were feeling the absence of female companionship that they had with the camp followers. Some of those women were very accommodating. Jabin and Bilson had been walking behind Lois most of the time, keeping her separated from Charlie. Speaking in a Bantu dialect, Jabin in a low tone said to Bilson, "Look at that sexy sway of her hips. I wish our women were more like that. I remember seeing her on the boat when she was wearing almost nothing. I'd like nothing better than to show her what a real man is like. Once I finished with her she wouldn't want to go back to that weakling behind us. I'd make her scream with pleasure like she never has before. I'd screw her bowlegged and she'd be begging for more."

Bilson replied, "Yes, you're right, she'd be begging for more, a real man, like me. Once she sees me she'll never be satisfied with the likes of you." As he said this he looked at Jabin's groin and held up his hand with the little finger extended.

Jabin retorted, "When we stop we'll see just who can do what with her."

The two guards talked this kind of trash all day and Charlie had heard every lecherous word spoken and he didn't like what he had been hearing. At this point he was very happy that Lois didn't understand what was being said.

What he didn't know was that Lois was picking up, simply from the tone of the conversation, what the gist was. She wasn't sure that she would be able to fend off both of the guards if they worked together to subdue her. She also worried about what would happen to Charlie if he tried to interfere. They hadn't been together for very long, just a couple of months, but Lois believed that she knew him well enough by this time to know for certain that he wouldn't just stand by and allow these men to attack her without doing something in her defense, and that was where her concern laid. With his hands bound behind his back he would be in no position to put up much of a fight. She was afraid that if he tried to interfere they would shoot him without any qualms at all. That only steeled her resolve to do whatever she could in her own defense. If she could defeat the attackers herself then there would be no need for Charlie to interfere.

She started planning how she could take out both of her attackers. She decided that in order to be sure she would have to use deadly force. She started going through a picture in her mind of all the vulnerable spots on the human body which when struck would result in death to the individual. Fortunately they had removed her bonds, which was something of a surprise since she had been the one to kill one of her attackers in their scuffle. The fact that she was a petite woman was working to her advantage in that respect. They obviously thought that her defeat of her two opponents had been a fluke, discounting her abilities.

She rehearsed many of her moves mentally. She started visualizing all of the kata she had perfected as she progressed through the ranks in Tae Kwon Do. She mentally thanked her Sensei for suggesting that when she sparred that she work with larger and stronger as well as higher ranked opponents. That experience had stood her in good stead in the earlier encounter.

When that thug had come at her with the machete she hadn't been fazed at all. She had been through any number of exercises using that kind of scenario at the Dojo. That had actually been

one of the earliest exercises and had followed through becoming more complex with each iteration. Admittedly, in the Dojo they had been using fake weapons and only making light contact, but the principle and the moves were the same. When she had been confronted that way her training had simply taken over. In the actual situation she didn't hold back and unleashed her full power in the kick with devastating effect. It was afterward that she had come to the realization just how effective the move really was.

She found her arms moving at her sides and had to consciously quell the movements otherwise it would have been very evident to her guards what she was doing. The muscle memory of the blocks and strikes that are practiced so diligently by practitioners of the martial arts can manifest itself unbidden. When one rises to the higher belts the moves have been practiced so much that conscious thought is no longer necessary. Muscle memory kicks in and the body reacts appropriately. The more she thought about it the more confident she became. She was moving into her Chi, that mental state wherein the discipline rules. A preternatural calm began to pervade her mind. She had progressed from her worry about what would happen to her, to what would happen to Charlie, to her Chi, which could be looked upon as the calm before the storm. She knew that when the time came she would, and more importantly, *could* do what needed to be done. She would rescue herself and Charlie from their captors. As long as her situational awareness was maintained, as long as she knew exactly what each of her attackers was doing — and that included Drago — she felt confident of the outcome of the encounter.

Charlie was afraid that they would actually try something when they stopped. The question was what could he do that wouldn't reveal what he was? If he couldn't come up with something that would do the job and yet conceal just what he could do, he would have to act overtly. He didn't want to take the chance of Lois being injured. He had to think of something and do it quickly. It didn't take too long for him to hit on a plan that he thought would work. In order for his plan to work it would require both of Drago's underlings to be in relatively close proximity. If Drago himself were near them that would be even better. If it worked it would not only eliminate the threat that these men posed to Lois in particular and to both of them in general but could get both of them away from their captors completely. If only he had been able to let Lois know his plan, but they were keeping them separated.

As they were leaving the jungle and entering the prairie grasslands, Drago called a halt. Behind them the sounds of the jungle were fading and the sounds of the grassland were starting to manifest. In front of them they could hear the cry of the big cats as they were in the hunt. There were fewer bird sounds. They could also hear the quieter sounds of the antelopes and other grass feeders as they moved about. Lois' hands had been untied, but Charlie's were still tied behind his back.

Lois knew that the greatest danger would manifest when a halt was called. In some respects she dreaded this, but in others she looked forward to it. Mentally she was as prepared as she could be.

All day Charlie had looked for a chance to put his plan into action. When it did come it came later than he had expected. It was along toward dusk, shortly after a halt was called for, that Drago's two underlings decided it was time to make their move. They were both walking toward Lois with grasping hands and evil intent in their eyes. Drago didn't say anything. He couldn't have cared less if his men roughed up the prisoners and had some fun with the woman in the process; in fact, the idea crossed his mind that he might just like to have a go at her himself. He kept remembering how she had looked in that skimpy bikini.

Lois had been waiting for this. She knew that the attack would come very soon. She turned to face her guards and

prepared herself. Very subtly she shifted her body into a ready stance but kept her arms at her sides so as not to give away the fact that she was prepared for the encounter. She was surprised when Charlie started moving. All she could do was look on in horror.

Seeing them start to make their move Charlie decided that it was time to put his plan into action. He ran at them and then leaped and twisted in the air so that he sailed into both of them with a flying body block. It was a maneuver that most soccer players could perform so there was no hint that he was actually flying as he did it. Landing on top of them as they hit the ground on their backs, he managed to use his head to head butt the one under the chin to stun him slightly. As he was getting up he kneed the other one in the groin. His objective was to draw their attention away from Lois and pin it on him.

Feeling pretty certain that this was accomplished, he got to his feet and ran, drawing the attention of Drago who was shouting at him and at his men. Charlie took off into the grass, which was waist high, making sure that he was going at a realistic pace and was keeping their attention focused on him. Keeping their attention on *\*him\** and not on Lois was the key. As his men recovered Drago shouted at them to shoot Charlie. As they both shouldered their rifles and fired, Charlie felt the dual impacts and dropped to the ground trying to make it look like he had been hit. He heard Lois wail, “\*Charlie?!?!\*” It pained him that he hadn't had a chance to tell her his plan and had to let her believe that he had been killed.

As soon as he was below the level of the grass he snapped the ropes around his wrists.

Drago ordered Jabin to go look for him and make sure that he was dead. Jabin, holding his rifle at the ready, moved off on Charlie's trail. When he got to the vicinity of where Charlie had dropped he started looking around, poking into the grass with his rifle barrel. Suddenly Jabin dropped from sight without a sound. Drago didn't see him go down, it happened so fast.

When Drago noticed that he was no longer visible he ordered Bilson to go look for him.

This time Drago was careful to watch his subordinate while he searched. As he was watching, Bilson suddenly disappeared. It looked like he had fallen into a hole in the ground.

Drago thought that this could be a possibility since the practice of digging pits to trap animals was still practiced in this area by the local population. He ordered Lois to get onto her feet and to follow his men.

Lois was distraught at the thought that Charlie had been killed. When she had seen them shoot at him and had seen him go down she had collapsed to the ground in a dead faint. As she was coming to, all she could think about was her anguish at losing him. If he was dead she didn't know how she would go on. She didn't react when Drago ordered her to her feet. She screamed in pain as Drago grabbed a handful of her hair and dragged her to her feet. Once she was on her feet he released his grip on her hair and gave her a shove that sent her stumbling ahead. She was like an automaton as she trudged up the trail in the wake of Drago's men.

Suddenly Drago spotted Jabin, trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey with his own belt and bootlaces. Drago was instantly on the alert and pulled his side arm. When he saw Bilson in the same condition he jabbed his gun in Lois' back. He shouted to Charlie, “I know you are out there. Give yourself up or I keel her!”

When Lois heard this her despair instantly vanished. <He's threatening me to get Charlie! He must still be *\*alive\**!> There was an instant surge of joy, which filled her heart at the thought. Then the reality of the situation hit her. <Drago has a gun in my back! How can I get out of this? That move that Charlie used on me!> Lois started moving her left arm across her back in an attempt to knock the gun away. She succeeded in moving it to the

side somewhat but as she turned and started to reach with her right hand to grab his forearm she missed the grab and Drago was able to bring the gun back to bear.

Charlie had circled wide and around to get behind Drago and was sneaking up on his previous location when he found that Drago had moved. That threw Charlie off. He suddenly saw movement out in the grass. It was Lois starting to use the Windmill. He shouted “Linda, NO!!!” and started to run at superspeed.

Drago wasn’t going to put up with this. He pulled the trigger, point blank hitting Lois just under the ribs on the left side in the front.

Charlie realized that Drago was at point blank range and a bullet from his gun would only be traveling inches before she was hit. They were too far away for him to get there even at superspeed to intervene and he heard a shot fired just before he reached Drago.

He heard Lois cry, “Charlie!!” and he saw Lois start to crumple like a marionette with the strings cut. Again he shouted, “Linda!!!!” and was on top of Drago.

He grabbed the gun and yanked it from his hand, breaking Drago’s trigger finger and crushing the gun in the process. Then he hit him; fortunately he automatically pulled his punch so that he didn’t do more than knock him out and possibly break his jaw.

Lois had collapsed to the ground. There was a gaping hole in her upper abdomen where the bullet had entered. The blood was not oozing from the wound, it was gushing. Charlie knew that loosing blood that fast would kill a person very quickly so time was of the essence. He ripped off the hem of her shirt and used it to try to staunch the blood flow or at least slow it down somewhat. He quickly x-rayed her. When he did he saw just how seriously injured she was. He knew that he didn’t have much time to get her to a hospital. He had to move her quickly.

She said weakly, between gasping breaths, “Charlie .. it hurts ... so ... bad. I don’t ... want to ... die. Help me ... Charlie. Charlie, I lo ...” as she passed out.

As he scooped her up Charlie shouted at her, “Don’t you die on me! Come on, stay with me! I love you! I need you!” He cradled her head against his shoulder as he took off with her in his arms and flew toward Brazzaville. He kept talking to her the entire time he had her in his arms. The incident had started at dusk and by the time he was airborne it was dark.

What Charlie didn’t see was the native at the verge of the jungle who was watching as he took flight. He was a runner being sent on to the camp by the cargo party to request a relief party of bearers. He had been attracted by the sounds of gunfire and was approaching the area with caution. When the native saw Charlie take flight he fled back the way he had come in panic, believing him to be an evil spirit.

She was in and out of consciousness as he flew. It took almost five minutes to get her to Brazzaville. That was where the nearest quality hospital was located. Because of her condition he had hurried, but he still had to take it slow enough so as not to aggravate the injury.

He landed as softly as he could outside the hospital and carried her in to the Emergency Room. Placing her gently on a gurney he started shouting for help. Immediately a nurse and an ER doctor rushed over and the doctor took charge. The doctor started shouting orders. “We have a gunshot wound, people. Two lines — D5W and normal saline. Type and cross-match. The surgeon will need the complete picture, CAT scan — STAT and prep for surgery.” The ER team was very efficient. The two IVs were started almost before he had completed all the orders. Blood was drawn for the type and cross-match for whole blood transfusions. They sent her immediately for a CAT scan. A CAT scan would give a virtual 3-D image, allowing the doctor to follow the path the bullet had taken and more easily determine

the extent of the tissue damage, where the bullet was lodged, extent of internal bleeding, etc. More information than a simple x-ray would give. In many cases the extra time was worth the benefit. In reality the difference in time was not as great as some would think.

Charlie followed her progress through the rooms using his x-ray vision up until they took her into surgery.

The doctor stopped as he hurried on his way to the surgical suite to get permission to operate. He introduced himself as Dr. M’benga. Charlie gave him permission to operate, calling himself her husband. Dr. M’benga said, “I’m going to be honest with you. I’m not sure she is going to pull through. The CAT scan indicates severe internal injury. I’ll do my best. I’ll have a better idea when we complete the operation. When I finish I’ll come here and find you.”

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In the middle of the surgery.

Imperceptible to human or even superhuman senses there was a disruption of the space/time continuum when there was a problem with the operation. What could most easily be described as a ‘snapshot’ of the current universe was created, slightly out of phase with the current universe, which has the vibratory characteristics of — Alpha 023 x Gamma 004 x Tau 036. A later analysis of the data would show that a new universe had been created with vibratory characteristics Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 040. (See Volume 3 to follow the incidents in the Tau 040 Universe.)

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036

Local designation — Alt 1

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Three hours later

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Charlie saw Dr. M’benga and another doctor approaching from the operating theater. They had been operating on Lois for three hours. They were obviously fatigued and they came in through the waiting room doors and looked around. When the doctor saw Charlie he walked over to him. With the fatigue and also concern written all over his face he introduced his assistant, “This is Dr. Bashir.” Then Dr. M’benga said, as if by way of excuse “We did the best we could.”

### Chapter 1 — The Outcome

May 23, 1992

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036

Local designation — Alt 1

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Dr. M’benga continued, “The internal injuries were very serious. The results of a gunshot of that caliber at close range ... the soft tissue damage was too extensive. She lost too much blood internally. We had to remove the spleen and the left kidney, which were both damaged by the bullet. We also had to resect portions of the bowel. I’m sorry; all of our efforts were in vain ... She passed away while we were working on her.”

Interrupting the doctor, Clark held up his hand to stop the doctor’s explanation and with a desperate tone in his voice asked, “Where is she? I must see her!” He knew that his attempt to fend off what the doctor was telling him was futile. He knew that it had to be true, but how was he going to accept it? He knew, he didn’t know how but he had known for almost an hour. He had felt it the instant she had died. He had to believe that it was something to do with the soul mates connection; that field which

bound them together. He had not had the chance to tell her so much, so much about herself and about him and more importantly, them. Just what they meant to each other — and now he would never have the chance.

With a sigh the doctor capitulated and said, “She’s in the recovery area right now. She will be moved to the morgue shortly.”

Clark pleaded, “Please take me to recovery. I need to see her. I need to hold her, one last time.”

“I understand.” Dr. M’benga nodded to Dr. Bashir who said, “This way.” And Dr. Bashir led him from the waiting room.

When Clark entered the recovery room the only thing he could see was her, his Lois, the love of his life.

He walked over to the bedside, leaned down and picked her limp form up and held her. Kissing her cooling lips, he wept, he wept uncontrollably. He wept for what they had had, the time they had had together. Memories of the time they had had together, the activities, the talks, the cuddling, the intimacies. He wept for what might have been. He remembered the time they had shared, and the joy, with sorrow.

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Flashback

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This was the second trip to the Brazzaville Golf Club grounds. On the previous trip Charlie had introduced Linda to what a picnic could be. She had to admit to herself that she had had a really negative attitude that time, but this time she was going with a more open mind. They drove into the parking area and Charlie picked up the basket out of the back of the Land Rover and they made their way to the picnic area.

When they got there they found the tree that they had been under on the previous trip and Charlie set the basket down.

Linda wandered over to the overlook and was standing there just drinking in the scenery. Charlie came up from behind and put his arms around her waist. She placed her hands over his and leaned her head back into his chest. “The power of the water rushing over and around all those boulders; it’s . . . awe inspiring. I never get tired of watching it.”

“Ziss ees zee rapids. I should tak you downstrem so zat you can see zee falls. Zay are a sight to be’old.

They had stood thus for several minutes before moving hand in hand over to where the picnic basket lay.

Charlie spread the cloth and sat down leaning back against the tree. Linda sat down near him and also leaned against the tree.

“Charlie, how long have you lived in Brazzaville?”

“I ‘ave bean ‘ere for a few months.”

“Why are you here?”

“I ‘ave bean looking for zomone or zumsing zat would cause me to stay een one place for a time. I ‘ave bean all over zee world and I ‘ave no found anysang or anyone to keep me anywhere for any time, unteeel now. I ‘ave ‘ad zum relationships wiss zum wome, but zay deed no amount to anysang. Zay were too zuperfish-al and deed not last.”

Charlie opened the basket and pulled out the appetizer and shared it with her before continuing. “I was en-gage-ed once but she decided to call eet off. Eet ‘as bean a lonely life zince zat time.” Clark thought briefly about Lana. Looking back on it, she had walked out on him, just at the time when he was going to need her the most. Now, looking over at Lois he realized that actually it was for the best.

“Oh, Charlie, I am so sorry.”

“Please, not to feeceel zorry pour moi. Zat ees in zee past. I have nosing to feel zorry about now. I am enjoy my time wiss you. Zat ees what mattairs, I just ‘ope zat you are enjoy your time wiss moi.”

“Charlie, you don’t know how much I am enjoying being with you.”

They munched on the appetizer for a while in silence. After a while Charlie asked, “Why are you ‘ere?”

“I’m beginning to feel that I’m here to be with you. I really like being with you. I enjoy our time together. Look at me, I never would have believed that I’d enjoy a picnic lunch and here I am, having a good time and enjoying the company of a handsome gentleman.”

Charlie got an embarrassed grin on his face and said, “And I wiss a most beau-ti-ful wo-man. ‘Ow ees eet zat zuch a beau-ti-ful wo-man ees not marr-i-ed?”

“I guess I just haven’t found the right man yet.”

“What would zee right man be like?”

Linda got a faraway look in her eyes and said, “He would be handsome, of course. He would be a gentle man, not somebody’s punching bag, mind you, but gentle with me. He would be caring and considerate and want the best for me, but he would still allow me to be me. He wouldn’t try to make me what he thought I should be. He would be a good conversationalist and have a good sense of humor.”

Charlie gave a soft chuckle. “What you deescribe ees a paragon. I ‘ave never met a paragon. Are you sure zat one eeven exeests?” All the while he was thinking, <She’s describing me. I wonder if she realizes that?>

Linda laughed, but she was giving him a very appraising look as she did so.

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End Flashback

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He pulled her body to him and rested her head on his left shoulder. He kissed the side of her face and then held her cheek to cheek, his tears wetting the side of her face.

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Flashback

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Lois had recently moved into the suite with Charlie. They had gone to the jewelers and purchased the wedding rings so that they could pretend to be married and had succeeded in passing themselves off as married to the staff at the local Planet office.

Charlie had found the Ubuntu, had purchased it and the refit was in progress.

Charlie opened the door for her as they returned from the hotel dining room where they had had a delicious dinner.

Lois sat down on the couch and Charlie started the conversation. “I’m not sure we’re ever going to get the shipping times for the cargo. The information that you can find on the internet is spotty at best. I bet that someday you’ll be able to find just about anything you want to on the internet.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t depend so much on the information age. Some good old fashioned legwork might just be the order of the day here.”

With a sly grin he said, “I know that you have the legs for it, but I’m not so sure about mine.”

She grinned back at him, and pulling her skirt up a little, said, “You really think so?”

Giving her legs a very intent study, he said, “Definitely! The best I have ever seen.”

“Thank you for the compliment. Flattery might just get you somewhere.” She patted the sofa next to herself.

He moved over and accepted her invitation. As he sat down he put his arm around her shoulder. She reached up with her hand and laced her fingers in his.

“You know, Charlie, I kinda like this arrangement. I like spending this time with you. There is something that has been bugging me, though. Why did you feel that you needed to pretend to be a Frenchman?”

“That’s easy to explain. I didn’t want you to think that you had any competition on this investigation. If I wasn’t an

American then I was less of a threat.”

“But why French?”

“This used to be a French colony and the French influence is very strong. Besides they say that French is the language of love. I really wanted you to like me and so I thought that if I was a romantic Frenchman I could sweep you off your feet and carry you off to my lair.” He ended the sentence with a flourish of his eyebrows.

She looked around the room and said, “Huh. Looks like a rather normal hotel room to me! I don’t see anything that speaks ‘lair’ at all. Besides, I didn’t move in with you until you had come out of the closet and revealed that you were an American. So much for the romantic Frenchman wooing me into his lair.”

Charlie laughed. “Maybe I need to work on my French accent some more.”

She laughed with him. “I think your French accent was adorable.”

“Ah, zee Mademoiselle, she ees mak zee fun of moi.”

She laughed even harder, “No, not at all. I loved it. It was the French accent that actually convinced me to take you up on your offer of help with my luggage. That reminds me, when we got here, you got room 503 for me. How did you do that? I had a reservation in the name of Lane, not King.”

“I didn’t give them a name or even say that you had a reservation. I simply asked the clerk to give you the room next to me and told him to put it on my bill.”

With a shocked expression she looked at him. “You mean that you’ve been paying for my room all this time? I was planning to submit the charges on my expense account when I got back. The desk clerk probably thinks that I’m your ‘girlfriend’, if you know what I mean.”

“I never thought of that. Now that we have the rings and you have moved in, I’ll tell him that you were my fiancé and that you were living in a separate room until we were married, at which time you moved in with me. It was all right and proper. You insisted on separate rooms until the wedding. Will that take care of it, you think?”

“I do think that would be better than letting him think I was a kept woman. Thank you.”

“I never wanted it to appear that way. I have the highest respect for you and I would never want anyone to think badly of you. Let’s do this. I haven’t closed out room 503 as yet. Let’s go down to the desk clerk together; we can close out that room and explain that you were in that room until we were married. Now that we are married we don’t need the extra room anymore.”

“Yeah, let’s do that. I like that idea. That should clear my reputation.”

“Please believe me that I would never knowingly do anything that would in any way damage your reputation. You mean too much to me for me to do anything like that. By doing this with the clerk it should enhance your reputation, if anything. Here is a woman whose morals are above reproach. She was engaged to be married and insisted on separate rooms until the ceremony.”

“Thank you. I know that you really don’t have to do this. You could just let everyone think what they want, but you are willing to protect my reputation and I really appreciate it. A reputation is something that is easily tarnished, but sometimes it’s all that you have and if it’s lost it’s hard to get it back.”

“Let’s go downstairs right now and polish up your reputation until it shines like the sun.”

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End Flashback

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<We did, too. Of course it didn’t do my reputation any good. To the French a guy having a kept woman is a badge of honor. I didn’t care though, I wanted her reputation cleared.>

Clark found that reliving these memories was comforting

even while he still held her cooling body.

## Chapter 2 — More Memories

Flashback

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036

Local designation — Alt 1

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During their time on the Ubuntu, while they were following the arms, they had had a lot of time to relax and just be together. They had established something of a routine in that each day they would anchor and while stopped swim together.

“Race you around the boat!” Lois shouted as she started out with a strong crawl stroke toward the bow. She made the turn around the bow and headed for the stern.

Charlie had been caught off guard. He could easily have used his superspeed and completed the circuit before she had gone two strokes, but where was the fun in that? So he took off with a lazy stroke. He stayed behind her admiring her form, both her swimming form and her physical form. He sped up a little because he didn’t want her to beat him too badly after all.

When they made the final turn around the stern they were neck-and-neck. He allowed her to win by a small margin. They stopped and treaded water near each other.

Clark said, “Whew, you sure can swim! I had a hard time keeping up with you!”

“I’ve always loved swimming. I thought about going out for the swimming team in high school but most of the practices conflicted with cheer leader practice and I didn’t want to give that up.”

“That was the swim team’s loss, I must say.”

“I still like to swim and it helps me stay in shape. Most of the time I use my Tae Kwon Do practice and I do a lot of Stairmaster but whenever I can fit it in I go to the ‘Y’ and use the pool. I actually think that the control I have developed with the Tae Kwon Do has helped with my diving.”

“I must say that you have nice ‘form’.”

“How do you know, you haven’t seen me dive.”

“I wasn’t talking about that kind of form.”

It dawned on her just what he was saying and she responded by splashing him in the face. “So you like my form, do you? I guess that in order for you to be able to spend some time appreciating it, you expect me to take another sunbath.”

“I was sure hoping that you would.”

She chuckled as she said, “Well, far be it for me to disappoint my admiring public. Let’s get out and do just that.”

They both climbed back up on deck. Lois went below to her cabin and changed into the pink bikini and then grabbed her towel and lotion and reappeared on deck.

They both climbed up on the cabin roof and Charlie proceeded to apply her lotion for her. This was the first time that she allowed him to do the front of her legs and abdomen as well as her back.

Their relationship had been progressing and Charlie was happy that it had. As he was stroking her body while applying the lotion, he was still marveling at the feel of her skin under his hands, the silky smooth texture of her skin and the ever-present tingle that accompanied skin-to-skin contact. He worshipped her body with his hands. He gently stroked her legs from her feet to her hips with slow, sensual strokes.

When he started on her abdomen he moved his hands slowly from side to side from the top of the bikini bottoms to the bottom of the bra top. She then took his hand and brought it up to the valley between her breasts and guided his hand as he applied the lotion to that area as well, brushing his hand over the inner swell of both breasts. She then guided his hands to the other side of the



bra top and the outer curve of her breasts. He couldn't believe that this was happening to him, that she was doing this, allowing him to have such intimate contact with her body.

After lying there on her back for a while she sat up and asked, "Charlie, you told me that you learned ballroom dance from a Nigerian princess. Was that all true or was that a line?"

"Every word was the truth. Okay, I'm not really from the Congo. I'm actually from Kansas; Smallville, Kansas, to be exact. What I told you about traveling the world was the truth. After high school I didn't know just what I wanted to do with my life, so I decided to travel before starting college. I would pick up odd jobs wherever I landed to pay my expenses while I was there. I was engaged as an English as a Second Language tutor to Princess Indera. Even though I was being paid by her father to instruct her, we became fast friends. At one point she asked me to wait for her to grow up so that she could marry me ..."

She interrupted, "So I have more than the twins to worry about as far as competition!"

He laughed, "You've got nothing to worry about. None of them present any competition to you. After all, we're 'married', aren't we?"

Lois brought her left hand up and looked admiringly at the ring that she was wearing. The look on her face was one of desire; but not a sexual desire, a desire or yearning for something she very desperately wanted. She closed her right hand over it and pulled both hands in toward her heart and with wonder in her voice said, "Yeah, I keep forgetting. Charlie, is this what married life is like, what married life with you would be like?"

Charlie had noted the fact that she wore her ring at all times. He couldn't help but think that if all it had meant to her was a cover story, she would have removed it as soon as they had left Brazzaville and they wouldn't be seeing the Daily Planet staff. He could barely keep the pleasure out of his voice as he replied, "I would hope so, but who knows? Maybe it would be even better."

She had a hopeful look on her face as she lay back down and rolled over on her stomach. She said, "Untie me, please."

This wasn't the first time he had done this for her, but each time was a thrill and the anticipation increased his heart rate as he reached out and untied both the neck ties and the back ties. With her arms folded and her head resting on her crossed arms he had a view of the outer curve of her breasts.

He believed that she was allowing him this view deliberately. She trusted him not to take advantage of her and she was giving him a treat. He proceeded to lather up her back and her legs. He paid special attention to the soles of her feet. He had discovered that she was somewhat ticklish and while he was doing this she started giggling and kicking her feet around. He moved up to her legs, stroking the length from her ankles to her hip. He started on the outer surface and moved around toward the back and then the inner. As he reached that sensitive inner area of the thigh her legs spread apart allowing him greater access and he heard her moan of pleasure and thought that there might be some desire, desire for him, mixed in with it.

When he finished he lay down on a towel next to her.

Clark said, "You don't know just how much I like doing that for you. I love to feel your skin under my hands."

With a very satisfied tone in her voice, Lois replied, "Oh, I think I do. If it's anything like the way I like to feel your hands on me, I love it. If I were a cat, I believe that I would be purring. I look forward to these times. It's one of the highlights of my day! Don't get me wrong, Charlie. I love all this time I have been having with you. It's just that some times are more special than others. It's all good, just some parts are better than good, they're fantastic. This falls into the fantastic category."

Happily, Charlie replied, "I'm glad that you feel that way. I'm really enjoying my time with you too. I just wonder how it could

be better."

In an almost pleading tone Lois said, "I don't know how it could be. I love our time together. Promise me that when we finish this we'll stay together."

With conviction in his tone Clark replied, "That is my dearest wish. After all, we \*are\* partners now. I want to stay with you. I promise that if we make it through this, we'll stay together."

Now with a bantering tone, Lois replied, "You had better believe that I'm going to hold you to that."

After a while she said, "I think I need to go in and cover up. I don't want to burn. Can you tie me up, please?"

After Charlie tied her top back on, she pushed him down on his back and proceeded to lie on top of him, full length. Since they had just been swimming all he was wearing were his Speedo trunks. She had her arms crossed high on his chest and her face was only a few inches from his and she stared into his eyes for a time. Her almost naked breasts were pressed into his naked chest and after a while she leaned in, slowly closing the distance until their lips gently came into contact. It didn't take too long until she was kissing him with a fervor that surprised even her. She uncrossed her arms and her hands came up and captured his face between them as the kiss deepened. As they started kissing his arms came up and around her and he held her tightly. She couldn't help but feel the bulge in the front of his trunks pressing into her thigh and after a time she pulled back and reluctantly said, "I guess I really do need to go below and change. I could keep this up all day, but I'd be like burnt toast."

Equally reluctantly he released her and she got up. She picked up the towel and lotion and jumped down to the deck. She turned back to look at him and said, "I really do love our time together."

He replied with a grin, "So do I."

She ducked below and went to her cabin to change.

The grin still on his face, Charlie floated down to the deck and went forward to pull in the anchor line.

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End Flashback

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He would never be able to hold her like that again.

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Flashback

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They had been on the trail for a few days and the going had not been too terribly hard since they had been able to stay on the trail. Each night they had moved off of the main trail to camp and each afternoon when they moved off the trail to set up camp, Linda was very relieved.

They had gotten into something of a routine. First Linda would find the clearing that they would camp in and Charlie would start setting up camp while she limbered up and practiced some kata. Once the tent was up and the sleeping bags laid out Charlie would join her and she would go over the moves she had already taught him and add some new moves. She was very pleased with the progress he was making.

After spending some time at this, Charlie would start the meal preparations while Linda would take care of her 'personal business', making sure to let Charlie know which direction she was headed beforehand.

This particular evening as Charlie was setting up the camp stove, he heard a rustling in the jungle and then he heard Linda let out a cry. "Charlie! HELP!!!!"

He stopped what he was doing and scanned with his enhanced vision to find her and see what the problem was, even as he was moving in the direction of her voice. What he saw sent a cold chill down his spine. A constrictor snake had dropped on her from an overhanging limb and already had a couple of coils around her. He had to be careful not to superspeed to her. He

knew that he had time but he was still worried about her. He shouted to her, “I’m on the way!”

When he got there he immediately grabbed the snake just behind the head. Calmly he said, “Don’t worry; I’ll have this off you in a few seconds.” With the judicious use of super strength he slowly unwound the snake’s coils from around her. As he was doing this the snake tried to wrap its coils around this new antagonist.

Linda was relieved that he was removing the snake from her body, but seeing that the snake was trying to entrap Charlie, she started worrying about him. In a near panic she asked, “Should I get the machete so that you can chop the head off?”

Trying to make it look realistic, Charlie was grunting and groaning apparently with the effort of handling the snake. Answering her, he said, “Nah, there’s no need to kill it. I’ll just take it away from our camp site and let it go.” He was able to easily fend it off as he carried it away to release it back into the jungle at some distance from their campsite. When he got back to camp, Linda was there waiting for him.

As soon as he showed up, she ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. He chuckled and said, “I thought I got rid of the constrictor!”

She giggled and tightened her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly. She said, “My hero! Thank you. I didn’t know what was happening, it happened so quickly. All I could think to do was call you. You saved me! If not for you I’d have been that snake’s dinner.”

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in tight. As he did she winced. He saw this and with concern in his voice asked, “How hard was he squeezing you? Pull your shirt up. I want to check.”

Reluctantly she released her arms from around his neck and stepped back. She pulled her shirt up and he could see the bruises starting to form where the snake had had a coil wrapped around her abdomen. He said, “Wait right here. I’ll be back in a minute.” He ran off into the jungle. He returned in just a few minutes. Unknown to Linda, he had run several miles at superspeed to find just what he was looking for. He walked back into camp with some fronds from an Aloe plant. He said, “Okay, let’s get that shirt off of you.” He helped her remove her shirt and then squeezed the gel out of the ends of the Aloe fronds and started smearing it on her skin wherever he saw the bruising starting. He x-rayed her ribs to see if any were cracked and found that they were okay. The worst she would have was some bruising.

As he was applying the Aloe, Linda at first was wincing somewhat, but by the time he was finished it felt a lot better. She asked, “Thanks, what was that?”

He replied, “Just something I picked up along the way in my travels. Aloe gel is good for bruising. I happened to see a group of Aloe plants nearby and remembered its medicinal properties and thought it would be worth a try.”

Not even thinking about the fact that she was standing there in bra and shorts, she threw her arms around his neck again and started kissing him. After a while they broke from the kiss and she said, “I think I need to keep you around to rescue me and treat all my bumps and scrapes. That felt good while you were applying that. Just like when you were applying my sun tan lotion.”

Charlie started thinking, <I wonder if this was the incident? If I hadn’t been here that snake might have killed her. I wonder if we are in the clear now?>

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End Flashback

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<How was I to know that this wasn’t the incident, that the snake was just a distraction and that she was going to be shot?>

He grieved ... a deep soul-wrenching grief that could not be

denied. He wept bitter tears. Tears of anger ... anger at the rebel that shot her, anger at Lex Luthor for providing the weapons, and most bitterly anger at himself for being the means of her finding and following the shipment. There would be more time for self-recrimination later; right now the grief was overwhelming.

Clark worried over what had happened. The longer the delay, the more he had an opportunity to mull over the circumstances of her injury. He couldn’t get past the nagging feeling that somehow he was the cause of her injury. <What if I hadn’t been there? If I hadn’t been there, would she have even been there? It was because of me that we knew where the shipment was located. Is it my fault that she was shot? Would she have found the shipment and followed it if I hadn’t been there? If that had been the case would she have been shot anyway and without me there to get her to the hospital wouldn’t she have died at the scene? It was a mortal wound.>

He thought back on what Herb had told him, <It was his belief that whatever happened was simply history playing itself out. Herb hadn’t been wrong. This is history as I knew it. It has played out without a hitch even though I tried my best to change things. In 1997 she was missing and presumed dead and now I know for a fact that she is dead. Why did it have to be this way? Why couldn’t I effect a change? This pain is almost too much to bear. Why did Herb have to tease me this way? To make me think that through my efforts I could change what has happened?>

<We were going to be \*so\* happy together. You had already made a difference in my life. All the time since the other Lois left I have had a hollow place in the center of my chest. A Lois-sized hole that no one else could fill. Then you came along. Now that hole was a perfect fit for you. When you were shot, when you passed out on me I thought I had lost you again. I almost died there beside you. I had to do everything I could to try to save you. Now ... now I’ve lost you again.>

Clark continued on in this fashion for hours. Finally the emotional drain and the energy expenditure caught up with him. He simply ran out of tears to shed. He gently laid her back down on the bed. He arranged her hands. Her eyes were already closed as if in sleep. He leaned in for one final kiss. When he rose up from that kiss he stood and simply wept until the staff came in to wheel her to the morgue.

### Chapter 3 — Sabotage

February 28, 1993

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036

Local designation — Alt 1

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The staff had arrived to wheel Lois down to the morgue, so Clark finally left the room and, fueled with a new determination, walked from the hospital.

Clark was spent emotionally, but he would have some time before the burial and he was determined that none of the weapons supplied by Luthor would make it into the hands of the rebels.

It was still dark when he exited the building. Ducking out of sight, he took off and flew to Dongou. It only took a few minutes for Clark to formulate a plan of action. Reasoning that it should be rather simple to play on the superstitious fears of the natives, he decided just how to go about it. Once he had them panicked, the fear should be contagious enough that he wouldn’t have any problem with the security detail.

Landing on the outskirts of Dongou, he made his way to the marina and went aboard the Ubuntu. Ignoring all the things that reminded him of Lois there on the boat, he quickly changed into his black outfit and headed for a secluded area before taking to the air again.

As he flew to the spot where they had been captured, he

thought about that incident. As he did, he couldn't help second-guessing himself. If he had just revealed himself and taken out the rebels at superspeed, they wouldn't have been captured. Word would have made it to the outside world about a super being, but he would deal with that when the time came. It was too late for recriminations now, however. His secret was safe but Lois, his Lois was dead as a result of his inaction.

Looking around with his enhanced vision, he located the shallow grave which held the remains of the thug that Lois had killed when he had attacked her with a machete. Thinking about that incident, he marveled that she had been so self-assured and she had handled that attack so well. Realistically, she hadn't been in any real danger the entire time and he had watched the whole thing play out. There was not the slightest hesitation in her actions; every move was exact, demonstrating her training and skill in the martial arts which were plainly evident to anyone with similar skills. Only those that had no training would have mistaken what happened for a fluke, because to the trained eye she was perfection in motion with every move precisely controlled, and the results for her attacker had been devastating.

Clark quickly dug the thug up and carried him as he flew to where the cargo train currently was bivouacked and from altitude he used his heat vision to cause the fire in the middle of the camp to flare up. This got the attention of the watch. The rebels on watch started checking around the camp, looking for intruders. The native bearers that were awake started shouting to their comrades, waking them up. The individual that had witnessed Clark flying off with Lois had spread his story through the entire camp and the other natives were already stirred up as a result. The fire flaring up that way caused their superstitious fears to flare as well.

Clark landed out of sight on the trail leading back the way they had come and held the dead man up so that it looked like he was alive as he approached the camp. He started howling and screaming incoherently. Shouting in Swahili in a sepulchral voice, he moaned, "Beware! ... Beware! ... My fate could be yours! ... Beware! ... Flee this place while you still can! ... Beware!" He accompanied these statements with more groans and screams. He started floating and carried the dead thug up several feet into the air and flew around above the level of the grasses.

He certainly had the attention of the native bearers. Some that had already been aroused by their comrades, seeing this, fell over in a dead faint. Others screamed like all of the devils of Hell were pursuing them and fled into the grass in whatever direction they happened to be facing at the time. They ran screaming and jabbering in Bantu about ghosts, spirits and demons. They didn't care where they were going as long as it was away from there. Those that happened to still be asleep started up from where they were sleeping and fled blindly up the trail and into the grassland around them.

The security detail was startled to say the least. The first thing that they thought of was to shoot at this apparition. They were a little less superstitious than the native bearers, but not much. The main difference was that they had weapons available to them, whereas the bearers did not. First one of the guards took a shot at this flying demon or ghost or whatever it was. As soon as one guard started shooting, others did as well.

No matter how many times they shot this flying demon, it continued to fly around and shout and moan as if nothing had happened at all. Several of the guards emptied entire clips into the demon and when their weapons failed to continue firing they flung them down as useless and fled.

Clark aimed another burst of heat vision at the logs on the bonfire, making them flare up once more. He then directed beams of heat vision against the weapons still in possession of the security detail, causing the stocks to burst into flame and the

metal to start glowing red. The panic of the natives coupled with what was happening to their weapons broke the resolve of the security detail that remained and they also fled in disarray.

He followed them, circling the camp in ever increasing circles, carrying the dead man for several kilometers. Once he was sure that they were far enough away that he wouldn't be interrupted for quite a while, he returned to the campsite.

Methodically he opened crate after crate, first identifying which crates had weapons and which held ammunition. The ammunition was the first thing that he would deal with, so he opened the crates and at superspeed removed the slug from each bullet and poured out the powder onto a tarp. After pouring the powder out, he then collected the slugs in a couple of the crates and melted them into a lump of lead. The cartridge cases he collected in a couple of other cases and treated them similarly, turning them into solid lumps of brass. Once all of the ammunition had been rendered harmless, he reclosed those crates and then he took the powder and laid it out in a trail forming his family crest. Once this was done he ignited it with a burst of heat vision. This left a scorch pattern on the ground in his "S" pattern. He thought to himself, <That should give them something to think about. There are crop circles being found in various locations but this will be different. Burning this into the ground will cause it to remain for a while and really give them something to think about.>

Next he removed the weapons from their crates. First he used his heat vision to heat the metal of a couple of machine guns until it was soft and then used his hands to reshape them into an anvil. Then he took the other weapons one at a time. Removing the stocks, he piled them on the bonfire at the center of the camp and allowed them to burn. Then one weapon at a time, he softened the metal with his heat vision until it was malleable and then using the anvil beat the metal into a new shape. Some of the weapons became rakes or hoes, some became shovels or plow blades, others became a mattock or an ax.

Going into the nearby jungle, he harvested some wood from which he made handles for the tools. Long straight handles for the hoes, rakes and shovels. Different shapes for the axes and mattocks.

The entire time he was thinking, <Lois, my love, this is for you. No longer will they have the weapons to hurt anyone, at least none that have been supplied by Luthor. I don't know what else I'm going to do about Luthor. I may not need to do anything. In my time he was not a problem. He had disappeared from the scene before I was ever hired by the Planet. At least this is being stopped.>

When he was finished, he was assured that if the paperwork said that they were receiving a shipment of farming implements, then farming implements was what they were going to receive. Once all of the metal had cooled sufficiently, he attached the handles he had fabricated and carefully repackaged the tools.

Since he knew exactly where the rebel camp was located, he flew there. He set up an impromptu forge in the foothills overlooking the camp with the anvil he had created from the machine guns.

Flying down into the camp, he collected the machine guns from their emplacements in the training area. Carrying them up to his forge he used his heat vision to heat the metal until it was red hot and then used his hands as hammers to pound the metal into the desired shapes.

The glow from his activity and the sparks that flew up were visible from the camp and the watchmen were in awe of this sight in the hills.

When he had finished with these weapons he returned them. They would never fire another shot at anyone. They would only be good for working the land now.

Several times at superspeed he passed through the camp

gathering up loose weapons. These he carried up to his forge.

Knowing that all of these activities would amaze and scare the uneducated natives, he decided to do something even more spectacular. Having seen the effect on them of stimulating the fire with his heat vision, he decided on an even more spectacular display. This time he piled the wooded stocks up on a ledge on the side of the hill nearest the camp and using his heat vision, started a bonfire with them. The flames suddenly shot up into the air for at least thirty meters. The watchers were startled by this. One minute there was not even a flicker and then within the blink of an eye flames shot up. The oils and waxes with which the wood of the stocks had been polished contributed to this. Even at this distance he could hear the exclamations of fear that this elicited in the camp.

This activity continued through the night. On another pass he knocked out all of the sentries and removed their weapons. When they awoke, each was holding a farming implement.

By this time the entire camp was aroused, but that didn't matter; since Clark had plenty of room to get up to speed, he was traveling faster than the eye could follow as he moved in and around the rebels.

Officers were running around shouting orders. Some had their side arms out and in their hands when they were suddenly snatched from their grasp. In some cases when the pistol was snatched away the finger on the trigger and inside the trigger guard was broken. Those that still had their side arms holstered found that when they reached for them all that they came up with were hand rakes and pruning shears.

Before morning he saw that his job was completed in the camp and returned to the foothills. After dismantling the forge, he did the same thing to all of the ammunition he had collected that he had with the cargo. He collected the powder and laid it out in his 'S' pattern, this time in a large flat area just outside the camp. When he ignited it, it flared up satisfactorily, leaving a scorch mark that would last for some time.

After igniting the powder, he returned the corpse of the rebel thug to his final resting place and flew back to Dongou.

When he walked into the marina, he found the guard that he had hired to guard the Ubuntu and since it was still within the time frame that had been paid for, he didn't owe him any additional fees. He dismissed him, telling him to keep what he had been paid. He went aboard and released the spring lines, started up the engine and pulled out of the marina into the main stream. As soon as he was out of sight of the town, he idled the engine and, planting his feet firmly on the deck, started flying. He speeded up until he was cruising at eighty-five knots. He maintained this speed until he reached Impfondo where he slowed to fifteen knots. As soon as he was past Impfondo, he speeded up again.

He managed to get the Ubuntu back to Brazzaville in record time and got her tied up in her slip in the marina before returning to the hospital. Before leaving the boat he packed their bags. He took them to the Bonne Nuit de Sommeil and rented suite 501 again.

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Returning to the hospital, he looked for and found Dr. M'benga and asked with tears in his eyes and raw emotion in his voice, "Dr. M'benga, what are the procedures? There will not be an autopsy, will there? I don't think I could bear to have her cut up any more than she already has been."

"No, my boy, there will be no need of an autopsy. We know the cause of death. We will be transferring her to a funeral parlor later in the morning. Is there any one in particular that you wish her remains sent to?"

"No, we aren't from here and any one will do. I do want to make special arrangements though. She is to be buried here, but in the future I will be having her moved to the states for a proper

burial for the rest of her family. If you could tell me which funeral home you would recommend, I will go see them. I want to make special arrangements for the enclosure. It will not be a standard casket. It needs to be air tight." He was thinking, <I'm going to purge the casket with nitrogen. That will preserve her body until I can reclaim it in 1997 and move it to its proper place.>

"I understand completely. Here, let me write the information down for you."

Clark took the information and went to see the undertaker. He looked for a cemetery that overlooked the rapids in the Congo River because she had really loved that view when they had picnicked at the golf club grounds.

It was a very small service. The only attendees were Charlie, Derek Price and the twins. After a short graveside ceremony, Derek and the twins had left but Charlie had remained. He just stood there, head bowed in silent contemplation, for hours on end.

#### Chapter 4 — The Twins Step Up-

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Universal Locator Designation  
Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036  
Local designation — Alt 1

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When he didn't come in to the office for a week, the staff began to wonder what was happening. He hadn't kept a strict schedule before the incident, but with him in the area this was unusual.

Suzanne decided that she needed to find him. So she went to Derek and said, "Derek, I'm worried about Charlot. 'E 'as no bean in zince zee fu-ner-al. I am worried about heem. I would lak to go and find heem."

Derek replied, "I agree with you, Suzanne. I'm worried about him also. How is the paste-up of this Sunday's page going?"

"Eet ees almo-st feenish-ed. Colette can feenish eet zery easily."

"Okay, take the afternoon and go find him. Let us know what you find."

"Sank you, Derek." She turned to her sister and said, "Colette, I weel call you when I find heem." She turned toward the door and picked up her bag as she passed her desk.

She decided to check the gravesite just on the off chance that she would find him there.

When she arrived, she found him kneeling on the ground beside the newly turned earth. She could hear that he was crying as she approached. She reached out and placed a hand gently on his shoulder. He didn't move a muscle. It was as if he didn't even know that she existed or that anyone was within a light year of him. Suzanne simply watched him as he silently cried, the tears falling slowly onto the earth covering her casket.

Suzanne was moved by his very apparent grief. <He really loved her. His love for her is what enabled him to resist Colette and me. Theirs was a true love, a love so deep, a love like that I can only wish Colette and I can find. If I ever find someone that will love me that way, I will do whatever it takes to hold onto it forever.> At that moment Suzanne grew up a little bit. She knelt next to him and put an arm across his shoulder. She turned toward him and pulled him into an embrace. He didn't resist but also he didn't really participate. He was like a manikin that she could move and position as she willed. She started stroking his hair and murmuring in his ear, "Charlot, I can zee zat you loved her very much. It is correct for you to grieve but you mus steel tak care of yourzef. Eef you cannot tak care of yourzef zen zumeone must tak care of you. Come ... come wiss moi Charlot. Come wiss Suzanne. Suzanne weel tak care of you. Come Charlot, let Suzanne tak care of you. Come ... come wiss

Suzanne.”

With her gentle urging he slowly rose from the ground like an automaton. He allowed her to lead him from the graveside and to her car. She took him to her apartment. He didn't say a word during the entire trip and when she got him into her apartment she led him to a chair and he slumped into it.

Suzanne picked up her phone and dialed the office. “Colette, j'ai trouvé Charlot. Je l'ai amené chez moi. J'ai besoin de ton aide. Va faire quelques emplettes pour le dîner et viens m'aider. Charlot est en très grand deuil.” She looked over at him with compassion in her eyes as she continued, “Nous devons prendre soin de lui. Il a besoin de nous.”

(tr: Colette, I found Charlie. I have him in my apartment. I need your help. Please pick up some groceries for dinner and come help. He is grieving very deeply. We must take care of him. He needs us.)

Colette responded, “Je serai là. Je suis d'accord avec toi. Il n'a personne d'autre qui peut l'aider. Nous sommes ses amies et nous devons être les meilleures amies possible pendant sa période de deuil. Il a besoin qu'on l'aide. Il était très amoureux d'elle; j'ai remarqué ça chaque fois qu'elle était avec lui. Ça a été un coup terrible. Je sympathise avec lui — on doit faire tout ce qu'on peut pour lui.

(tr: “I'll be right there. I agree with you. He has no one else that he can rely upon. We are his friends and we must be the best friends that we can be for him in his time of grief. He needs us to help him. He was very much in love with her. I saw that whenever she was with him. This has been a terrible blow. We must help him through this period of mourning. My heart goes out to him in his hour of need. We must do whatever we can for him.”)

“Colette, je l'ai trouvé à sa tombe. Je ne crois pas qu'il a quitté sa sépulture une minute depuis l'enterrement. Je ne pense pas qu'il ait mangé ou dormi non plus. Je crains que, s'il continue de cette manière, qu'il ne survivra pas la mort de sa bien-aimée. Il va mourir d'un coeur brisé. On doit faire tout ce qu'on peut pour le ramener du précipice. On doit être ses amies et non pas ses séductrices. Pour ma part, je serai l'amie dont il a besoin. J'espère que tu feras de même.”

(tr: “Colette, I found him at her grave. I don't think he has left her gravesite for a minute since the burial. I don't think he has eaten or slept a minute since that day. I am afraid that if he continues in this fashion that he will not survive her death. He will die of a broken heart. We need to do whatever we can to bring him back from the brink. We must be his friends. We need to stop playing around with his emotions. He needs us as his friends, not his seducers. I, for one, am going to be the friend that he needs. I hope that you will too.”)

“Chère soeur, sais que tu peux compter sur moi et, plus important encore, que Charlot peut compter sur moi. Comme toi, je veux être l'amie dont il a besoin aujourd'hui.”

(tr: Dear sister, you know that you can count on me, but more important, Charlie can count on me. Like you, I want to be the friend that he needs right now.”)

“Merci, Colette. À bientôt. Explique à Derek ce qui se passe. Je suis certaine qu'il s'inquiète aussi.

(tr: Thank you, Colette. I'll see you in a little while. Please tell Derek what we are doing. I'm sure he is worried about Charlie as much as we are.”)

Suzanne hung up the phone. She walked over to Charlie and laid a hand on his shoulder. She could hear him muttering and brought her ear close so that she could hear what he was saying.

What she heard was heart rending. “Lois, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Lois. Why did you have to leave me, Lois? I just wasn't fast enough. Why did you try the windmill? I couldn't get to you fast enough. Not fast enough. Too slow to save you, my love, my love. Just like before. The car. Not fast enough. Forgive me.

Forgive me, Mom and Dad. Please forgive me, Lois. I'll never see you again. How can I go on? I don't want to go on, not without you. Lois, come back and take me with you. I don't want to go on without you. Please, Lois.”

Suzanne was aware that they had been undercover so when she heard the name Lois she decided that it must be his wife's real name. What Suzanne could not possibly know was that Lois' death had piled up on the death of his parents.

Clark had been ten years old and just coming into his powers. He was stronger than any other kid his age and he was also faster. His parents had gone into town for dinner and had left the ten-year-old Clark with a sitter. The sitter had been on the phone and hadn't been paying nearly enough attention to her charge. He had been out on the front porch and had seen the lights of his Dad's truck approaching from town. He had started to run down to the gate where they would be turning off the road into the farm. He liked to do that because Dad always let him hop up and ride in the bed of the truck.

He then saw the approach of the other car following an erratic path, weaving back and forth across the road as it approached his parents' truck. Dad had tried to avoid it but at the last second as Jonathan swerved to the right, since the other car had started moving to their left, it suddenly changed direction and hit them head on. He had been running and sped up as he saw what was happening but he wasn't fast enough to get there before the collision.

Although he was strong enough to get the crumpled door open and he got both of his parents out of the truck before it burst into flames, it was already too late to save their lives. They had both been killed in the impact. He hadn't been fast enough then and he hadn't been fast enough this time. If he was fast enough to save so many strangers from fires and earthquakes, why wasn't he fast enough to save the ones he loved?

Suzanne had been hearing all of his ramblings and wasn't sure what to make of some of it but chalked it all up to extreme grief.

A little while later Colette arrived with the groceries. Colette took over as comforter while Suzanne prepared a meal.

Colette also heard the muttered self-recriminations uttered by Charlie. She realized that there was a lot more going on than just the death of his wife here. There was a deep-seated bitterness from an incident in the past. She went out to the kitchen to talk to Suzanne.

“Suzanne, Charlot a plus que la mort de sa femme sur sa conscience. Il pleure un incident lointain. Un incident dont il n'a jamais vraiment fait le deuil et qui se manifeste maintenant. Il est possible que nous ne soyons pas capables de le sortir de sa torpeur. La plaie est peut-être trop profonde . . .”

(tr: Suzanne, this is more than just the death of his wife. He is grieving over an incident far in the past. An incident he never really grieved properly over and it is all manifesting now. We may not be able to bring him out of this grief. It may be too deep for us.”)

Suzanne replied: “Nous devons faire notre possible. C'est notre ami. On voudrait qu'il fasse pareil pour nous si on était dans le même état.”

(tr: “We must do what we can. He is our friend. We would want him to do something for us if we were in the same emotional state.”)

“Je suis d'accord, mais ça peut être au-delà de nos moyens.”

(tr: “I agree, but this may be beyond us.”)

“On doit faire de notre mieux. Charlot en vaut la peine.”

(tr: “We must do the best that we can. Charlie is worth our effort.”)

When Suzanne had completed the meal preparations, they managed to move Charlie to the table, but he had no motivation to eat. He simply sat there looking at the plate of food.

Suzanne moved over beside him and, taking a forkful of food, presented it to him. “Ere Charlot, tak ziss for Suzanne. Come on Charlot, open zee mouss and eat pour Suzanne. Come on, Charlot, do eet pour Suzanne.” He took it and chewed mechanically and finally swallowed. “Zatz eet, Charlot, zatz eet. Eat zum more pour Suzanne. Bon, now zum more.” Taking this as a hopeful sign, Suzanne continued feeding him until his plate was empty.

After the plates were cleared, Suzanne said, to Colette, “Je suis heureuse que j’aille pu le faire manger. Maintenant, je pense qu’on doit le mettre au lit. Je doute qu’il ait dormi depuis les funérailles. Mettons le dans mon lit; je dormirai sur le divan.”

(tr: “I am glad that I was able to get him to eat. Now I think that we need to put him in bed. I do not believe that he has slept since the funeral. We will put him in my bed. I will sleep on the couch.”)

They each took a hand and encouraged Charlie to get up and move into the bedroom. When they got him in there they had him sit on the side of the bed. They cooperated in removing all but his briefs and then coaxed him under the covers. He fell asleep almost immediately but it was a disturbed slumber.

Suzanne took a pillow and blankets out and prepared her couch for the night. Seeing that Suzanne was preparing the couch for sleeping as she was leaving, Colette said, “Appelle-moi si tu as besoin d’aide cette nuit. Autrement, je passerai ici demain matin pour voir comment il est.”

(tr: “If you need any help during the night, call me. Otherwise, I will come here in the morning to see how he is.”)

Looking up from what she was doing, Suzanne replied, “J’appellerai si j’ai besoin de quoi que ce soit. Je sais que je peux compter sur toi.”

(tr: I will call if I need anything. I know that I can count on you. He seems somewhat restless.”)

Colette asked, “Devrais-je dire à Derek que tu ne seras pas là demain? Tu as accumulé du temps de vacance et je peux prendre la relève s’il t’en manque.”

(tr: “Should I tell Derek that you will not be in tomorrow? You have the vacation time accrued and if you run out then I can begin taking care of him.”)

Suzanne replied, “Oui, informe Derek que je vais prendre congé jusqu’à ce que Charlie aille mieux. Si ça prend trop de temps, tu pourras me remplacer.”

(tr: Yes, please tell Derek that I will take vacation until Charlie is better. If it takes too long you can take over for me.”)

Suzanne saw Colette to the door and thanked her sister again by giving her an embrace and a kiss on each cheek as she left. Closing the door, she went and stood in the doorway of the bedroom and with a concerned expression she watched Charlie. He was very restless. She watched for some time and decided that she would try to soothe him so that he could sleep peacefully.

She moved over and sat on the edge of the bed. She reached out and started stroking his hair and face. Cooing to him as she did so, “I am wiss vous, Charlot. Suzanne ees wiss vous. Slep, Charlot, slep for Suzanne. Zatz eet, Charlot, slep for Suzanne.” She continued stroking his hair and occasionally saying soothing things. As soon as she would stop and start to leave he would become restless again.

Suzanne got up and pulled a nightie from her bureau. She stripped and put on the nightie. As soon as she had it on, she dragged a chair over close to the bed and got comfortable. She frequently had to reach over and stroke his hair and speak to him to get him to settle down. After a while, she went out and got the blanket off the couch and wrapped up in it as she sat in the chair. Throughout the night her slumber was disturbed by having to comfort Charlot. When the morning sun started coming in through the window, she came to the realization that she had only managed about an hour of uninterrupted sleep at any stretch

throughout the night. She felt like she had been run over by a truck, but looking over at Charlot and seeing him sleep peacefully was enough of a reward to compensate her for her discomfort. She looked at him with an expression that was full of pity as he lay there. Suddenly he started muttering incoherently. Suddenly he shouted, “No, Linda!” It took her by surprise with its suddenness. She realized that that was probably the key; it was the incident which had caused her injury, the one he hadn’t been fast enough to prevent. They wouldn’t be able to ask him about it until he came out of his delirium.

A little later Colette arrived. Letting herself in with her key, she expected to find Suzanne asleep on the couch. However, she wasn’t there and even the blanket was gone. She tip-toed over to the bedroom door and peeked in. What she saw was her sister curled up in a chair beside the bed, sound asleep.

Colette closed the door again and went into the kitchen and put some coffee on to brew. When it was finished, she prepared it the way her sister liked it and went to call her.

Suzanne was bleary-eyed with lack of sleep as she moved to the kitchen with Colette. She heaved a heavy sigh as she sat down at the table and picked up her coffee. After taking a sip, she put the cup down and said, “Je ne sais pas combien de temps je serai capable de continuer ça, mais comment pourrais-je arrêter? Il a besoin de nous. J’ai mal au dos à force de dormir dans cette chaise.”

(tr: “I don’t know how long I’m going to be able to do this, but how can I stop? He needs us. My back aches from sleeping in that chair.”)

Colette asked, “Pourquoi ne pas dormir dans le lit avec lui?”

(tr: “Why not sleep in the bed with him?”)

“Ce ne serait pas correct. Il a besoin d’amis, pas d’amants!”

(tr: “That would not be right. Right now he needs friends, not lovers.”)

“Tu as raison, Suzanne. Pourquoi ne pas prendre des tours? Dors sur le canapé ce soir. Je prendrai la chaise.”

(tr: “You’re right, Suzanne. Why don’t we take turns? You sleep on the couch tonight and I’ll take the chair.”)

“Tu me sauves la vie, Colette! On devrait se relayer au travail. Si tu reste près de lui ce soir et je dors, je peux aller travailler demain.”

(tr: “Colette, you are a life saver. Why don’t we alternate at work? If you sit with him tonight and I sleep, I can go in to work tomorrow.”)

“Oh oui! Bonne idée! De cette façon, ni l’une ni l’autre n’aura à se taper tout le boulot. Je vais avertir Derek aujourd’hui.”

(tr: “Yes, let’s do that. That way neither one of us has to do all the work. I’ll tell Derek today.”)

Colette, usually the more flighty of the sisters, for a change was the practical one when she asked, “Pense-tu qu’on devrait peut-être appeler un médecin?”

(tr: “Do you think that perhaps we should call a doctor?”)

Suzanne replied, “J’y ai pensé. Physiquement, il semble être en bonne santé; c’est son esprit qui est touché. Je pense qu’on l’aide autant qu’un docteur pourrait le faire.”

(tr: “I’ve thought of that. Physically, he seems to be healthy; it is his mind that is affected. I think that we are doing as well as any doctor would do.”)

“Si tu le dis... Je dois aller travailler. Vas-tu être correcte ici toute seule avec lui?”

(tr: “If you say so. I need to leave for work. Will you be okay here alone with him?”)

“Ça devrait aller. Fait part à Derek de nos intentions. Je vais te voir ce soir.”

(tr: “I can handle it. Let Derek know what we will be doing and I’ll see you this evening.”)

Colette gave her sister a hug before walking out the door to

go in to the office.

Suzanne returned to her post in the chair.

### Chapter 5 — Luthor

October 1992 Metropolis

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036

Local designation — Alt 1

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Nigel St. John knocked on Lex's office door. He heard Lex say, "Come in!" and then he entered swiftly. "Sir, we just got a report in on the latest arms shipment. The Brazzaville office reports that the arms arrived."

Lex leaned back in his chair and blew a smoke ring from his Cuban cigar. "Very good. Excellent, excellent, indeed. We need to start preparing the next shipment."

Nigel squared his heels and took a deep breath to deliver the bad news. He was well aware that Lex did not enjoy bad news and often took his anger out on his subordinates. Clearing his throat, he began. "There was, however, a problem. When the rebels opened the crates that held the arms, they claim that what they found were farming implements."

Lex rocked forward, anger and incredulity on his face. He didn't like surprises within this side of his business. "Is this some kind of joke? Are they trying to get out of paying for the arms? Where do they get off trying something like this?"

Placing a stack of pictures on the desk in front of Lex, he said, "They sent pictures of what they found."

Lex leafed through them and then flung them down in disgust. "They are obviously trying to get double. They substituted these farming implements for the arms and took these pictures to make it look like we had stiffed them and switched these out for what they had ordered. Get back to them and demand that they stop this fraud and pay what they owe, or else."

"Or else what, Sir?"

"Or else they won't be getting any more arms from me and I'll start supplying arms to the Congolese government."

"They anticipated your response and said that if you followed such an action as you have proposed that they will notify the American media of your connection to the illegal arms trade. They think you did this deliberately to them. It may or may not be related to this, but there was a report of some Americans following the cargo. They were captured by the rebels; however, they managed to escape. The rebels say that they claimed to be reporters. The circumstances of their escape seem to be somewhat jumbled, but one definite detail is that they were both shot. The female had a mortal wound and the man was at least wounded. The man disappeared along with the body of the woman. They assume that he took the body and fled while they were otherwise occupied. They were convinced that there was no way for him to be able to survive without food, water or shelter, being wounded and carrying that burden. Also, in that area there are plenty of big cats prowling. If they had scented blood they would have finished them off. All that would be left would be some bones."

"Were they able to get any names?"

"The leader of the rebel team that had them said, he heard the names 'Charlie' and 'Linda'. Also there was another thing that was somewhat unusual. The leader was disarmed by the man. His trigger finger was broken and somehow the gun he had used on the woman was mangled. He was struck a single blow which knocked him out and broke his jaw. His report had to be in writing since his jaw is wired shut."

"Contact them and have the gun sent to Brazzaville. Contact our man in the State Department and have it sent back in the diplomatic pouch. I want to see that gun."

"They may not wish to cooperate. They don't believe you held up your end of the deal."

Lex continued, "Send our own people if you have to, but I want a follow-up done. Have them search the area from where the encounter occurred all the way back to the town. Interview anyone that might have seen something. Check the local hospitals for any gunshot wound victims. We need to be sure. Follow any leads you get."

Nigel gave a nod of assent and turned to leave. Luthor stopped him. "Nigel, check and see if any newspapers are missing any of their staff. Let's see if we can identify who we are dealing with."

Again Nigel nodded and this time managed to get out the door.

Luthor brooded over this information. It looked like there was a leak somewhere and he would need to plug it. He hit an intercom switch. "Mrs. Cox, please come to my office, at once." He started tapping his finger on his desk as he waited.

Mrs. Cox entered the office without knocking. She was dressed in an extremely short skirt and a very low-cut blouse. "Mrs. Cox, it would appear that we have a leak in the operation. Someone passed on the information about the guns to the media. A couple of reporters were following them. There's no telling how much they found out. Call in the head of that operation. Have him in my office tomorrow morning. Tomorrow is going to be difficult, trying to get to the bottom of this. Order dinner for two to be sent up. You'll join me, of course."

"Of course, Lex." She swayed her hips very suggestively as she exited his office.

He watched her as she walked out, planning just how he would relax, with her, before he really dug in on this problem tomorrow.

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Brazzaville

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Charlie had been living with Suzanne now for over a week. He was still in a grief-stricken and somewhat delusional state. He was at least eating on his own, after a fashion, but it still required a lot of encouragement from Suzanne. The girls had been sharing the night duties and were not faring too badly as a result. He seemed to be coming out of his condition slowly.

Whichever girl was working that day had been bringing them groceries on a daily basis and they had both been staying in Suzanne's apartment. She had been discussing Charlie's state with her sister. "Colette, Charlot semble être en meilleurs états, qu'en penses-tu?"

(tr: "Colette, Charlot seems to be responding better, what do you think?")

"Je suis d'accord. Il devrait être de retour à la normale d'ici peu."

(tr: "I agree. It may not be too much longer before he is back to normal. )

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Downtown Metropolis

3 weeks later

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Nigel knocked on Luthor's door. From the other side he heard, "Come!" Nigel opened the door and entered carrying a box.

"Ah, what have we here? Is this the package from the Congo?"

"Yes, Sir. It arrived by courier a short time ago." He placed it on Luthor's desk in front of him.

As Luthor opened the box he asked, "What have you found so far on the follow-up?"

"We haven't found a single trace of either the man or the woman. It's like they vanished into thin air, which is the oddest

coincidence. One of the native bearers had been sent to the camp to request a relief crew be sent. As he was nearing the edge of the grassland, he heard shots being fired. Because of this he moved ahead more cautiously. It was almost dark so he couldn't see much. He said that suddenly, what he described as an evil spirit took off from the ground and flew away. He panicked and fled back to the cargo train. When the security team from the cargo train arrived at the site, they found the group that had been escorting the prisoners either unconscious or tied up. There was blood on the ground and marks of a scuffle but no bodies."

Luthor looked up with the mangled gun in his hand and said, "And this. What could have done this to this weapon?" He was turning it over and over in his hands. "It was fired at least once before it was crushed. How was it crushed?" Luthor was wearing a very pensive expression. "An evil spirit, you say? The native said an evil spirit flew up from the ground?"

"Yes, sir. But you know how these superstitious natives are. Most of the time you can't believe even half of what they say."

"But — what if? What if we take what he said as fact?"

"It was dark; his eyes could have been playing tricks on him."

"But what if they weren't? What if something, no, someone ... took the woman and flew her to safety?"

"According to the shooter it was a mortal wound."

"Ah, but perhaps only if medical care was not immediately available. Expand the search immediately. Check every hospital in a two-hundred-kilometer, no, on second thought, check every hospital in the country for a woman with a gunshot wound. When did the incident occur? Whatever, I want to know if a woman who had been shot was brought into a hospital the night of the incident, any hospital." I need to know what I'm dealing with."

"As you wish. I'll initiate the inquiry immediately." Nigel turned and left.

Luthor continued to sit at his desk, turning the crushed gun around and around in his hands and muttering. "No normal man could have done this. It would take enormous strength to crush this steel. And to be able to fly?!?!?!? How could this possibly be? I just may be up against a worthy adversary. I'll find you, whoever and wherever you are. I'll find you and if you cross me, I'll crush you!" Looking down at the gun again, he said with determination, "I'll crush you the way you crushed this gun. Lex Luthor will crush you the same way I have crushed \*all\* of my adversaries, with cunning. Physical strength is as nothing compared to my brain. Lex Luthor will win, as I always do."

Lex depressed a key on his intercom. "Mrs. Cox, attend me, if you will."

"Right away, Lex."

As she opened the door, Lex was replacing the crushed gun back in the box. "Have this sent to LexLabs. I want a complete analysis. I need to know just how much force needed to be applied to crush this gun this way. See to it. Oh, and call the madam and have her send one of her girls over tonight." When he saw her hurt expression, he continued, "I have something else for you to be doing for me tonight, my sweet. I've checked and the only Metropolis-based newspaper that has an office in Brazzaville is the Daily Planet. I want you to pack an overnight bag. I'll have a jet waiting for you. I want you to go to Brazzaville, to the Daily Planet office and see if you can find out if any of their reporters were checking up on our arms shipment. I expect you can use your ... abundant ... talents ... to secure all the information I need."

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Brazzaville

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It had been about a month since Lois' death and Charlie had slowly come out of his delusional state that had been brought about through his profound grief, lack of sleep and lack of food.

Even though he derived most of his energy from the sun, he still needed food, at least occasionally.

With the return of his sanity, he had become aware of what had been happening and he was very grateful to the twins for the care they had given him.

As usual, this evening both of the girls were having dinner with him, and he felt that he needed to express his appreciation but didn't know how to go about it.

They noted this and tried to draw him out. Suzanne moved over, sat on his lap and put her arms around his neck, forcing him to look at her. She asked, "Charlot, why are you so sad? We thought that we 'ad 'elped you through zat." She leaned in and gave him a kiss.

Again he looked down as he said, "I am embarrassed to say that I don't know how to adequately thank you for all that you have done for me."

"Charlot, mon petit chou, do not feel bad about zat. Colette and I deed what we needed to do for our friend. We are zo zorry zat you lost your wife."

Charlie replied, "You don't understand; we weren't really married. We were working together on the story but that was our cover. I did hope that when we were finished that we would actually be married, but we had never ..."

Startled, Suzanne replied, "Oh, Charlot, I'm so sorry. You never really had the chance to make love with your lady love?"

"No, I had been waiting for the right woman to come along and then when she did we wanted to wait until we were finished with this investigation."

"Charlot, do not blame yourself. Eet was no your fault zat she was shot. At times you thought zat eet was her zat was taking care of you. If not for zat you might not have come back to us. We were very much afraid zat you were going to die also. You were on zee brink."

"I almost wish you hadn't brought me back, that I had died with her."

"Charlot, do not talk like that. Somehow, some way, some time you will find someone that will take her place."

"No, you do not understand. There is no other; there can be no other. She was the only one." But he started thinking, <Could there be another? She was my Lois, but there \*are\* other Lois Lanes. What if? Maybe what I need is to hang on until Herb returns.> The very thought gave him a sudden jolt of hope.

The girls noticed that he was lost in thought and afterwards they saw a change in attitude. He said, "You know, Suzanne, you may be right. Perhaps there is another woman out there for me." With a wistful look and sound in his voice he finished with, "Only time will tell."

Some animation came back into his voice as he addressed each of the girls in turn. "I think it's time for me to return to my hotel. Thank you, Suzanne, and you, Colette, I do appreciate all that you have done for me. Please tell Derek that I'll be in tomorrow morning and that if he has a few minutes, I'd like to talk to him. I'll be staying for the rest of the year and I might as well do some reporting while I'm here."

One of the first things he did was to go to the paper's morgue and pull a copy of the paper that carried the story of the rescue of the D'Arnet family and make a copy of it. He then contacted the papers that had covered the story and, identifying himself, requested copies of the original prints and also copies of that particular edition. When he got them he had his favorite picture framed and he placed it on his night table next to his bed. He cut the article out of the paper, carefully folded it and placed it in his billfold. He had another picture framed and kept it on his desk at the Planet office.

A couple of days later, Charlie was alone in the office when a strange woman with a café-au-lait complexion, low-cut blouse and very short leather skirt walked in the door. From the way she



was dressed he knew that she wasn't local, so when he stood up and walked over to greet her he used his French accent. "Ello, may I 'elp you?"

Mrs. Cox gave him a very close appraisal and liked what she saw. She replied, "Why, yes, you may." Pointedly looking at his crotch, she asked, "I was wondering just how large a staff you have ... Uh, I mean, uh, here in this office."

Startled by her boldness, Clark took the innocent meaning and calmly replied, "We 'ave a rather small staff 'ere."

Still looking down, Mrs. Cox replied, "Not from what I can see. Uh," then Mrs. Cox asked, "Would you like to have me for lunch," deliberately using a double entendre.

Clark replied, "No, sank vous. I mus remain in zee office. I am zee only one 'ere at zis time."

Mrs. Cox reached out and stroked his cheek and her hand continued down, lingering on his chest. As she felt his pecs she got a look of extreme interest. She brought her other hand up and using both started exploring his body. As she did so she started to get a very dreamy expression. She was thinking, <Wow, he's better built than Lex and Lex is outstanding! I would just love to find out if the rest of him is as solidly built as his chest. If what I am feeling is any indication, he's something special. I wonder how he would be in bed?>

He allowed her to do this for a short time and then, placing his hands over hers, he removed her hands and brought them together gently, although he really wanted to just tell her to keep her hands off.

Coming out of her dreamy state, Mrs. Cox asked, "What are you doing later this evening, say, after dinner?"

"I'm zo zorry, I am occu-pied zis evening." <And every other evening while you are around.>

"I'll just bet that you are. Ah well, I guess it's not meant to be. Do you have visiting reporters come in frequently?"

"No, not zeery off-ten."

"Do you have any visiting right now?"

"Mais non, uh, no we do not."

She closed the distance between them again and started stroking his cheek once more as she continued, "Are you sure that there has been no one visiting?"

Charlie was sure at this point that this woman was here because Luthor had sent her. He was happy that he was the only one here and that the framed picture of Lois was turned so that she could not see it and that Claude was absent. Claude, he was sure, would have spilled the beans and told her everything. Right then and there he decided that he needed to talk to Dr. M'Benga to make sure that no one would talk about Lois. In the meantime he needed to decide what he would tell this woman. Not wanting to give away the fact that Lois had died, he quickly came to a decision and then said, "We deed recently 'ave a marr-i-ed couple visit-ing, but zay were no 'ere pour zery long."

She asked, "Oh, what were their names?"

He decided to give her a minimum of information and to try to confuse the issue somewhat. He said, "Zay were call-ed Charlie and Linda. Zay were from États-Unis."

"What were they here for?"

"Zay nevair tol us just what zay were 'ere for. Zay only stopp-ed in here brief-ly."

Mrs. Cox at this point could see that she had all of the information that she was about to get and since this handsome specimen wouldn't go to lunch or dinner with her, rather than waste a lot of time, she decided that she would take what she had and return to Luthor. With a very disappointed air she said, "It's a shame that you won't go out with me. We could have had such a good time, but thank you for the information." After saying this she turned and left.

Charlie hoped he hadn't given her too much information. But he wasn't very impressed with her persistence in getting

information from more than one source. Lois would have beaten her hands down, he reflected sadly.

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Two weeks later

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Lex Luthor called Nigel and asked him to come to his office. When he came in, Luthor asked, "Nigel, I need an update on your inquiry into the newspaper reporters. Mrs. Cox has confirmed that there was a married couple in Brazzaville, briefly."

"There has only been a single reporter absent from the Metropolis office of the Daily Planet, Lois Lane. The report is that she has been on a 'rest leave'. The pressures of the job had been getting to her and she needed some time off. If it was a married couple, then that leaves her out as a possibility."

"Lois Lane ... I've heard that name. Wasn't she involved in the investigation that broke up our car heist ring about a year ago?"

"One and the same. Fortunately, we were able to cover our tracks and all she was able to get were the lower-level operators. It was a minor hindrance at worst."

"But a hindrance none the less. We'll have to find out what she looks like. I don't think that I've ever seen her picture. See if you can get a picture from the DMV."

"I can do that."

"See to it that you do. That still doesn't tell me who the pair was that was in the Congo. Continue to follow up on that."

"Yes, Sir."

"Oh, and Nigel, when you get the picture have it wired to our people in the Congo and see if they recognize her."

"Will do."

Luthor depressed a switch on the intercom. "Mrs. Cox, have we received the report on that weapon as yet?"

"I have it right here."

"Bring it to me, please."

She brought it in to him and stood by as he examined it. As he read he mused aloud. "Mmmm, partial finger prints, not enough to get a match. Weapon fired once since cleaning. Force required to deform the metal ... What?? That much? That's physically impossible! I never would have believed it possible to generate that much force. Surely no human hand could generate that much power. There \*must\* be a mistake here. Have them recheck their findings."

"I already did, Lex. This is the confirmatory report. When I saw the initial report, I immediately requested confirmation. They took new weapons of the same type and used a hydraulic system to crush it. That's how much force was needed."

"Unbelievable!" He was stunned.

## Chapter 6 — Revenge

Somewhere in Metropolis

September 28, 1992

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036

Local designation — Alt 1

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In a basement workshop, the Newtrich sisters were working on a project. Actually, to be more correct, Nell was working on a project. Nell was the technical brain of the operation and Lucille was the operational brain. They had both been laid off from their respective positions, Nell as a technician in the Enhanced Optical Weapons Systems Division of LexLabs and Lucille from her position as a reporter for LNN, another subsidiary of LuthorCorp. Neither had been able in the last six months to find alternate employment and their funds were starting to be depleted. They had been contacted a couple of months ago with an offer of employment; however, it was something that neither of them

would consider. They had an outstanding loan on their car and had been told that they had better maintain the payments or else. After being informed of this they had been contacted by a woman named Constance with an offer of employment. When it was explained that they would be hired as ‘Hostesses’, they had both flatly refused. They knew the source of the offer and were very angry. They had developed a determination to take out their frustrations on, and have revenge against, Lex Luthor as the head of LuthorCorp and the author of their difficulties.

Nell had been working on a laser that was housed in the case of a video cam, very effectively disguising it. Power would be provided by a belt battery pack just like that used by TV crews. The only problem had been the crystal. They surely couldn’t afford a ruby rod, so Nell had used a red rock crystal she had spotted in the lab. It had been small enough that before she was escorted out of the building she had been able to pocket it and take it with her. She had no idea as to exactly what it was. All she knew was that it was red like a ruby and it should focus the beam the way she wanted. She wasn’t sure exactly how well it would work, though. It seemed that in the dark it emitted a red glow of its own and she didn’t know if that might not interfere with the laser beam as it was emitted. They would just have to try.

Lucille walked in while Nell was working. She was very obviously impatient with her sister. “Don’t you have that thing finished yet? Nell, the White Orchid Ball is only a few days away. We need this to be ready for that event.”

“I know, I know. I’m working on it. I just need a little more time. Polishing the ends of this crystal took longer than I had imagined that it would. The ends had to be perfectly parallel in order to prevent scatter or attenuation due to deflection.” She fumbled and dropped the crystal as she was trying to get it placed in its holder within the laser. Fortunately it only fell to the desktop. If it had fallen to the floor it might have shattered. Nell quickly grabbed for it but it skittered out of reach. Lucille reached out calmly and corralled the wayward crystal. Nell was somewhat appalled when she did this because she was not wearing gloves and was getting her fingerprints and body oils all over the crystal as a result. She then handed it to Nell who opened both gloved hands to receive it.

“Nell, be careful! Don’t break that, you know we can’t afford a replacement. I thought you said I could count on you.”

“You can! It just slipped, that’s all.” She continued, muttering to herself, “Now I’ve got to clean it again.”

“Nell, things are always slipping with you. You are the most \*clumsy\*, butterfingere person I know. That’s one of the things that got you fired from LexLabs. You dropped that weapon you were working on. What was it called, the Quinton debilitator or some such idiotic name?”

As Nell was busy re-cleaning the crystal, she was shocked at the name her sister had given the weapon she had been working on. She replied with some exasperation, “It was called a Quantum Disruptor!”

“Whatever! When you dropped it, it fried the scientist that invented it before he had a chance to complete the drawings — just before destroying itself. Now it’s an incomplete project. They don’t even have the prototype to look at!”

“But it wasn’t my fault! There was a grease spot on the floor and I slipped on it! It was an accident.”

“Nell, you’re an accident just looking for a place to happen. Now tell me about this laser again. How is it going to work?”

“Well, this is my own design. I needed to take some shortcuts because we didn’t have the money to buy what I really wanted. I was able to scavenge some of the parts from old TV sets. I built the circuit board from scratch. Here, you see these? These are the capacitors. The power comes from the battery pack and passes through this inverter that changes the current from DC to AC and then this module steps up the voltage and feeds it to this bank of

capacitors. They store the energy and supply it in a burst to the exciter which initiates the source ... “

“Whoa, you lost me back at AC and DC. Can’t you put all of that into simple terms?”

Nell, with an exasperated look at her sister, pointed at the power leads and said, “The power comes in on this wire.” Pointing at the inverter, “It goes through here and gets changed from one type of energy to another.” Pointing at the capacitors she said, “The energy gets stored here until the trigger is pushed. Then it lights the lamp and this directs the beam to the crystal,” she pointed at the red crystal, “and then it comes out here.” She pointed at the lens.

“That’s more like it. Don’t most lasers use a ruby?”

Nell, starting to lose patience with her sister and her complete ignorance of technical matters, almost shouted, “Do you really think we could afford a ruby? Where was I supposed to get the money for that?”

“Okay, okay, no ruby. What’s this red crystal?”

“I don’t know. Nobody knew. It’s just a rock crystal that was sent in for analysis from some place in Kansas. Nobody had gotten around to the analysis and it’s not likely that anyone will miss it. I thought that I might be able to use it so I stuck it in my pocket. The only thing that concerns me is the fact that it glows in the dark. I don’t know if that will interfere with the beam or not. That’s one of the things that I need to test.”

“There we go back to tests again. When are you going to start testing this thing?”

Nell, her frustration becoming even more evident, raised her voice even higher. “I’d be able to test it sooner if you didn’t ask me so many questions!”

“Shouldn’t you be working on putting it together so that you can start the tests?”

Nell said, “I know!” as she finished polishing the crystal and finally succeeded in placing it in the clips, pinching her finger in the process. She let out an “Ouch” and, yanking off her glove stuck the injured finger in her mouth to suck on it.

“How much more needs to be done on this? It looks like you’re finished.”

With her head close to the mechanism, Nell answered in a somewhat distracted manner as she had her hands working inside the mechanism. “No, it’s not finished. I have to check and then confirm the alignment, then I have to check the exciter and the power supply. Then I need to check the collimator. Then I have to recheck the alignment and then we have to run a low power test ... “

“Just tell me that this is going to work!”

“It’s going to work!”

“Tell me why.”

Nell replied, as if reciting something she had learned by heart, “Because we have to get back at Lex Luthor for firing us and we don’t care how we do it. Actually, the more painfully the better.”

Lucille asked, “Can’t we skip some of those steps? It sounds like it’s going to take you more time than we have!”

Nell looked away from her work and at Lucille, her hands still buried in the mechanism, and said, “No, we can’t skip any step, not if you want to be sure it’s going to work the way it’s supposed to.”

“When are you going to start the testing?”

“I should be ready to start the testing tomorrow.”

“All right, then keep working. Just work faster; I don’t want to miss the ball.”

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October 3, 1992

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The day of the White Orchid Ball was upon them. That morning, Lex had called Nigel in. “Nigel, what progress have

you made on getting a picture of Lois Lane?”

“The picture I was able to obtain from DMV wasn’t really usable, but through a contact in the State Department I was able to obtain a passport photo which, though it is several years old, was of better quality. I sent it off to our people in Brazzaville. They flew it up to the rebel camp and showed it to the people that saw the female reporter. They were not able to make a positive ID. They said it could be, but then again, it could have been any woman.”

“Are we dealing with incompetents? How difficult is it to look at a picture and tell if it’s someone you saw or not? Okay, whatever. Keep following up on that. Another action item. This evening we’ll have several members of the space sub-committees in the Senate and House at the ball. Have a meeting room prepared so that I can get them together and try to convince them to throw their support behind my offer to assist with the space program. Have the appropriate libations available. Send in Mrs. Cox on your way out.”

A couple of minutes later, Mrs. Cox entered. “Mrs. Cox, please contact Mitzie and have her send a few of the girls over to act as hostesses for the meeting I’m panning with the members of the Senate and House sub-committees. It would be nice if she would have the special room ready if any of the esteemed members of government would like to accompany one of the girls back to her establishment. Tell her to make sure that the girls are dressed appropriately.”

“I’ll take care of it, Lex.”

“I know, I can always count on you.”

She sashayed out of his office with a sexy swaying of her hips while he looked on appreciatively.

A few seconds later Lex’s intercom buzzed. “Yes?”

“Lex, Miranda is here to see you.”

Lex let out a virulent expletive and then calmed himself and depressed a key. “Send her in.”

The door opened and in stepped Miranda Michaels. She didn’t beat around the bush but came straight to the point. “Lex, where’s my money?”

“What money would that be?”

“My cut from the last arms shipment.”

“Well, you see, Miranda, we ran into some unexpected complications. The shipment was compromised.”

“Compromised? Does that mean that we didn’t get paid? What happened?”

“There was an apparent leak and the media were notified of the shipment. There were some reporters following the cargo. Aside from that, the customers are claiming that we defaulted on the cargo, substituting farming implements for the arms.”

“Was it delivered?”

“According to them, no it wasn’t, but yes, it was delivered.”

“Then where’s my money? I need those funds to finance my research.”

“I told you, they are refusing to pay. They say they received a shipment of hoes and rakes!”

“Don’t give me that! I know you; you got paid, you’re just holding out on me. You should give me my share. If you can’t, maybe we could compromise. Why don’t we do this, the ball is tonight. I’d be willing to forgive my share if you’d invite me to come as your date. It could be like old times. After the ball we could spend some time together.” As she was saying this she pointedly was looking in the direction of his private apartments.

“Miranda, Miranda, you know that there is no ‘we’, not anymore. That’s ancient history.”

“In other words there’s no us \*and\* no money.”

“That’s right.” Lex turned around to pick up a cigar from his humidor. When he turned back around Miranda sprayed him in the face with a liquid from a small atomizer she had carried in her pocket. “Ugh, what was that? It smells like old athletic socks.”

“It’s just one of my concoctions. I call it ‘Revenge’. Are you sure that there isn’t anything that you want to say to me?”

Dismissively, Luthor said, “Just good day. You can see yourself out.”

With a more than disappointed air she turned to leave. “You haven’t heard the last of me, Lex.” When she reached the door she turned to give him one last look as she exited, only to see him blow a smoke ring and exhibit his pleasure with his cigar.

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After she returned to her shop, Miranda checked the contents of the atomizer. She sprayed a male lab rat and then placed it in the cage of a female. The male rat went through the courting ritual normal for rats, which consisted of checking to make sure that his companion was a female, and then he mounted her repeatedly.

She started muttering to herself, “Why didn’t it work? This compound should have had him groveling at my feet, begging me to love him and make love to him. I wonder if it has a delayed response in the human species. It sure worked on \*this\* rat. Why didn’t it work on \*that\* rat in LexTower?”

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Later at the ball

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Luthor descended the stairs with several members of congress with whom he had been meeting. He had been proposing to add his support to the space effort and EPRAD. His concern over the sabotage of the Prometheus shuttle had caused him to come forward and offer his assistance.

As he reached the middle of the flight he spotted Mayson Drake, ADA. She was standing alone in the center of the floor looking very lovely and yet feeling somewhat uncomfortable and out of place in her ball finery. Her pose was such that a delicately shaped leg was visible through the slit in the skirt. Luthor excused himself from his party and made a beeline toward her. He couldn’t take his eyes off of her as he continued the descent on auto-pilot. He felt he had to meet her. He had to possess her. She meant everything to him. He couldn’t live without her. When he reached her he asked, “And whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

She stuck out her hand as if to shake his and said, “Mayson Drake, Assistant District Attorney.” Luthor took her hand, and lifting it to his lips, kissed the back of it and then turning it over he kissed her palm. He signaled the band to start paying.

He said, “May I have the pleasure of this dance?”

“I’d be delighted.” He took her in his arms and they started dancing to the waltz that the band started to play.

He was a good dancer, excellent actually, but Mayson started feeling somewhat uncomfortable as the dance progressed with the way he kept pulling her in closer and closer.

The music ended, there was some polite applause for the band and they moved over to the refreshment area. Luthor made some small talk as they browsed the refreshments.

About this time a ‘news crew’ from LNN arrived to document the evening. It consisted of two women, a cameraperson and a reporter. They were apparently planning to interview Luthor and were setting up near him. Luthor didn’t think much of it until it looked like they were ready to start.

He heard Lucille say, “Ready, Nell? Shoot!”

A red beam sprang out from the lens of the ‘video cam’ and struck Luthor in the neck, severing the carotid artery. The guards rushed the shooter and she was knocked off balance. The beam from the laser swung wildly, inflicting more injury on Luthor as it tore a path across his neck and down his chest. Blood started to spurt from the wound like a geyser. Lucille shouted, “Now it’s your turn to suffer, Luthor!” Luthor fell to the floor unconscious, wallowing in a pool of his own blood that got larger by the second. Before help was able to arrive, he had bled to death.

As the sisters were captured there was a small explosion and a puff of smoke from the weapon. Nell was slightly injured by the explosion and, being startled by it, dropped the weapon. She and her sister were both captured by security.

Mayson Drake, being the sole law enforcement official on the scene, ordered the guards to detain all of the attendees and directed Luthor's staff to call 911 and summon the police and an ambulance. Acting under her orders, the guards kept all of the guests there so that they could be interviewed by the police about the incident.

When the police arrived they took the sisters into custody, cuffed them, read them their rights and led them out to a black-n-white to be taken to headquarters. Shortly after the police arrived the paramedics did also. The lead medic checked Luthor, turned to his assistant and said, "Call the coroner's office. This is a DOA."

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During the trial the sisters tried to claim 'Justifiable Homicide' and in the course of the trial, information on Luthor's involvement in the prostitution racket in Metropolis came to light as well as his involvement in the firing of many young women, the sisters included, who were then forced into sex slavery. This led to additional revelations about his involvement in other rackets. It was finally revealed that he was, in fact, the infamous 'Boss' of the Metropolis rackets.

At the conclusion of the trial, the jury was sympathetic to the plight that the sisters had been put into and took into consideration the additional revelations of Luthor's involvement in the rackets and gave a guilty verdict to a lesser charge, recommending leniency. The judge gave them relatively light sentences, which he then commuted to time served.

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Clark read about the incident at the White Orchid Ball when the story came in over the wire service. He didn't like anyone dying; however, in this case he was willing to make an exception. He decided to make a trip to the cemetery.

It had been his habit to visit her grave at least once a week to put new flowers on it and to talk to her. As he knelt by her grave he placed a dozen red roses on the ground and was silent for a time.

Finally he was able to speak and said, "Lois, a lot has been happening. I only have a few months to wait for Herb to show up and I've been keeping busy working for the local office. We just got in a report on Luthor. His crimes have finally caught up with him. Some women he had wronged built a weapon and were able to end his miserable life. I guess he won't be sending any more arms to the rebels and he has paid for what those arms he supplied did to you."

"Before Herb shows up, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to take a page out of Jack Benny's book(1). I'm going to go to the florist and I am going to set up a trust. I'm going to have one red rose delivered and placed on your grave every day. I know that you are looking down on us and you will see, you'll see just how much you meant to me. I wish you were here with me right now, I miss you so, my love. Every day I still wish that I had died instead of you or at least with you and if it hadn't been for the twins I might have, but that wasn't meant to be."

"You'll be happy to hear that the twins have really matured through this experience. They have seen what we meant to each other and they want that kind of relationship, a loving relationship with one man. They have become my very closest friends and have stopped playing their little games with men. They are looking for that one relationship that will last. They are treating me like a big brother now and asking my advice on lots of things, but mostly interpersonal relationships. It has gotten to the point that they want me to interview any prospective dates and give them my approval before they will go out with him and

they have decided that the next man they have sex with will be the man that they marry. I hope that they will find their future husbands before I leave. That would make my departure a lot easier." Again he lapsed into silence and just knelt there for a while. Eventually he returned to his hotel.

Since they were the only things that he had to remember his Lois, he resolved to keep her jewelry and her purse with her ID and donate the clothing to a charity there in Brazzaville.

### Chapter 7 — Herb Shows Up and Herb Shows Up

February 28, 1993

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036

Local designation — Alt 1

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Clark was at Livingstone Falls waiting for Herb to make his appearance. He had gotten there early just to be on the safe side. Suddenly the Time Sled appeared, starting as a shimmer in the air in front of him and then solidifying. Herb, the 1912 version, saw Clark and took in the fact that he was alone and his downtrodden demeanor. He said, "What has happened, my boy? Didn't you find your Lois?"

His reply was full of bitterness. "Oh, I found her alright. Herb, I was the reason that she died. If I hadn't been here, she might be alive right now. It was because of me that she was on the trail of the weapons and that was why she was shot. I really don't know if I want to go on this way. It's because of me that she is dead." He started weeping, miserably. All of the hurt and self-recrimination that he had gone through immediately after her death reasserted itself in an instant.

"I am so sorry to hear that. I had sincerely hoped that you would be able to succeed in this mission and that through your intervention she could be saved. It appears that history cannot in fact be changed in this fashion. Even with the possibility that she could have been declared missing and simply appear in the future, alive and well, was not sufficient. I know how hard this must be for you. I don't know what can be done at this point. It will require much thought."

"Have you formed any friendships or other relationships that would need some closure before we were to move back to your time? Do you have any goodbyes to say?"

"No, Herb, I've already taken care of all that. There are two girls that have been especially close. I had the privilege of walking both of them down the aisle in their weddings just last month. All the friends I've made here are under the impression that since Lois is now dead, I am going into seclusion and returning to the States. The last thing I did was file a missing person report with the Brazzaville police. They will be informing Perry. I had a talk with Derek and if Perry inquires he will be given the story that she disappeared in the interior. I told Derek that he needed to give him that story because if he was told the truth his heart couldn't take it. My luggage is stacked up over there. I'll get it."

"Very well, my boy, just load it aboard and we will be on our way."

After Clark had loaded his luggage and they were both seated, Herb set the time control for 1997. True to his word they reappeared at a time so close to five minutes after they left that the difference wasn't worth mentioning. They were actually in the street in front of Clark's apartment. Clark collected his luggage and led the way inside.

Herb stood in Clark's living room while Clark put his bags in his bedroom. When Clark rejoined him in the living room, he said, "Clark, I hate to leave you like this. Is there anything that I can do?"

With a more than somewhat bitter tone in his voice, he

replied, “No, Herb, I think you’ve done quite enough already.”

“Clark, you have to realize that this is simply history playing itself out as you had experienced it. True, your intervention is what caused the current state to exist, but there was no way for us to know that.”

Suddenly there was a shimmer in the air and a portal somewhat resembling a door appeared in the air between them. Through this portal stepped a slightly older incarnation of Herb than the one that had taken Clark on his mission. This Herb was the 1917 version. He said, “Ah, I see that I am right on time!” Turning to his 1912 self, the 1917 Herb said, “I’ll take over from here. I think you have a mission to perform in Prime. We need access to Superman’s space ship which means that you need to take the Time Sled back and help Clark to recover it.”

“My, my, my. I surely wasn’t expecting to see you here!”

“Ah, but you see, I knew that you would be here and that I would arrive in time. To me it is history and history cannot be changed.” Turning to Clark he said, “My boy, we have a lot to do.”

“Herb, uh, Herbs, uh,” Clark pointed at the younger Herb. “Thank you for what you tried to do for me.” Clark then pointed to the newly arrived Herb and said, “I don’t know if I want to do this anymore. I had her in my arms and I lost her. I don’t know if I can do that again. It was far too painful.”

The newly arrived Herb addressed both of his companions. “As you can see, I am somewhat older than my other self here. He is from 1912 whereas I am from 1917; one can learn a lot in five years. I have learned a few things since I was his age and started fooling around with time and trying to change it. I’ve learned since his time that I really cannot ‘change’ history. All I can do is bend it somewhat. That is what we are going to do.” He turned to his earlier self and said, “I really cannot say any more until you have left. Too much information too soon is not a good thing. Right now you need to concentrate on the mission that I mentioned. Go forward to 2438 and go to TTEMPO Headquarters. They will outline your mission for you. History must be maintained.”

The younger Herb said, “Quite right, quite right. I understand completely.” He turned to Clark. “I will leave you now, my boy. I’m sure that my future self here will be able to help you to complete the mission that we started, but which had such tragic results. I feel certain that the outcome of your new mission will be a success now that my older self is involved.” He turned to the older Herb and said, “I am satisfied that where I failed you will succeed. I leave him in your hands.” So saying, he ascended the stairs to the door. At the door he turned and tipped his bowler hat and turning away, opened the door and exited.

Herb said, “Please forgive him. He meant well. He just didn’t have enough experience in these matters.”

Clark started to laugh. “Do you always talk about yourself in the third person like that?”

Herb, realizing what he had done only because Clark had pointed it out, chuckled and said, “Only in circumstances such as these. Well, down to business.” He started rubbing his hands together as he said, “We have to find you a Lois!”

“Herb, what do you mean \*a\* Lois?”

“My boy, the sad reality of the situation is that the Lois of this world no longer exists. Unfortunately you were there and you saw her die. That is an historical fact that we cannot get away from at this point in the history of this universe. What I propose is that we look in yet other universes, looking specifically for one in which the Clark Kent of that universe either never existed or for whatever reason is no longer among the living. This is a truly unique situation, which I had not anticipated. The truth is that the soul of Lois in this universe no longer exists. Her soul was lost when she died. It is not here to pass on to another vessel. That was the source of your so-profound grief. Half of your soul had

ceased to exist. It is amazing that you survived the ordeal.”

“Truthfully, Herb, I almost didn’t. If it hadn’t been for the care and concern of some friends I had made in Brazzaville, I might not have. I almost died, but they brought me back from the brink. I do owe them my life.”

Returning to the previous topic, he said, “But, Herb, even if we do find such a universe, she won’t be \*my\* Lois. She will be somebody else’s Lois. It won’t be the same thing.”

“My boy, I want you to think back to your various encounters with the Lois Lane of Prime. Were you attracted to her?”

“Like no one else, other than \*my\* Lois, that is. But what I had with my Lois was so much stronger than what I had with the other Lois. It was only a matter of degree, but still what I had with my Lois was so strong it couldn’t be denied.”

“My boy, I think that you will find that since all Clarks are soul mates of all Lois Lanes then the attraction will be there no matter what Lois you are with. I believe that what we will find is since your soul mate no longer exists if we find a Lois whose soul mate also no longer exists, the bond formed by your union will be such as you had with your Lois. At least that is my supposition.”

Herb continued, “I have found a universe where the Lois of that universe has lost her Clark and the same situation pertains. The Clark soul died with the body. We need to deliver you to her at a critical time to prevent her from going into the same level of depression that you experienced. She might not be as lucky as you to have friends to help her through it.”

“Before we do that, however, I need to ask a favor of you. Recall how you helped out in Prime when Clark was trapped in a time bubble? I have discovered, while I was searching for a Lois for you, that there are a number of universes where the help of another Superman was necessary. There are situations, similar to those that the Clark in Prime went through, that in order to have a positive resolution and prevent the creation of yet more universes require the intervention of another Superman to help out. Can I count on you, my boy?”

Clark thought about this for a few seconds. It would be an opportunity for him to act openly for a time and actually help. He might even be able to interact with Lois again. The prospect was intriguing. He said, “Well, Herb, I don’t see why not; after all, I’d be helping. You’re sure that I succeed in all cases?”

“Yes, quite. You succeed in all cases, but you really need to be there. Based upon what we know of the history of the Prime Superman there are a number of incidents, and I propose that we center our actions on those circumstances I have identified because the local Clark had a more than fair chance of dying. I have some approximate time frames within which we can act. Due to subtle differences within the universes we cannot be as precise as we would like to be. What I propose is this, we will pick an incident that I have an approximate time for and I will drop you off in that time period. It will be up to you to make contact.”

“How soon do we need to start?”

“There’s no time like the present. The first incident is one wherein Lois was being courted by Lex Luthor. In order to keep Superman from interfering with the wedding, he trapped Clark in a Kryptonite cage in the wine cellar. In Prime, Clark almost died from the Kryptonite exposure but he managed to get himself out of the cage. Also, if he hadn’t managed to get out of the cage, Luthor was about to kill him with a fire ax. This Clark didn’t get so lucky. He needed help to get out of the cage. I think that the ploy you used in the Congo, that of using the name of Charles King, would be appropriate but this time I would suggest that you take your costume with you. As long as you make sure that you don’t appear at the same place at the same time as your counterpart, you should be able to operate openly.”

“Again, you will be in a situation wherein you will not have a

legitimate source of income. You will need the gemstones that you mined previously to exchange for cash. I need to ask you to bring those out for me to examine. Could you do so please?"

Clark went to his bedroom and retrieved the bag of uncut gemstones from one of his bags. He brought it into the living room and placed it on his coffee table. Herb opened the bag and dumped the gems onto the surface. "Clark, I need you to use your x-ray and microscopic vision to examine these gems. We are looking for one specific jewel. It will have the main characteristics of a star sapphire; however, it will be just a little bit off. It is a rather large stone, approximately 2700 carats."

Thinking for a moment, Clark said, "That's big. That would be over ½ a kilogram or about 1.2 pounds of gemstone."

Herb gave him an approving look like a proud parent. "Quite right, my boy, quite right. That is quite a large stone. Record-setting in size."

Clark started his examination. Before using his vision he sorted the gems by obvious size and color, isolating only the largest of the colored stones for a closer examination. Moving at superspeed, it only took a second to do the sorting.

This sorting resulted in three gems of interest. He first used his x-ray vision, then a combination of x-ray and microscopic to examine them. As he did so he slowly got a look of wonder on his face. He reached out and picked up one of the stones and held it in his hand for a closer examination. In a hushed tone he said, "Herb, this must be the stone you are looking for. It's like no other stone I have ever seen."

In a very upbeat tone Herb said, "My boy, that is truly a unique stone. In actuality, that stone is not from here. That stone is a fragment from your home planet. It is a very special form of Kryptonite. It resembles a star sapphire but it is a double star."

"Why don't I feel anything from it, then?"

"Ah, you see, this is a very special form of Kryptonite. It has to be energized by exposure to a particular fragment of Red Kryptonite. If you are in contact with this sapphire-blue Kryptonite when you are exposed to the Red Kryptonite, a portion of your super energy will be copied and the energy stored in the gem. The energy can then be transferred to your soul mate, giving her your powers."

A stunned look swept quickly over Clark's face, then he blurted out, "Wait a minute, you mean that if I had had that on me and held this rock while being exposed to this specific Red K rock, then Lois would have had my powers and wouldn't have died? Where's this Red K? Let's go back and use it to save her!"

"No, Clark, it doesn't work that way. We *could* save her in that way, but that would *not* change your situation. Please have a seat. I need to tell you a story."

Clark sat down on the couch and Herb sat in the armchair.

"Clark, you need to listen very carefully to what I am about to tell you. It will have significant bearing on our future mission. Have you ever heard of Schrödinger's cat?"

Never having taken a heavy load in math and science in college since he was a journalism major, he asked, "What kind of cat was it, Siamese, Maltese, tabby? What does a cat have to do with this anyhow?"

"My boy, please bear with me. Schrödinger's cat is a theoretical construct wherein a cat, Schrödinger's cat, is sealed up in a steel box. Also within the box is the means of executing the cat; however, the execution may or may not occur based upon the decay of a particular piece of a radioactive element. Since the cat is within a sealed steel box there is no way for us to know, without opening the box of course, if the cat is alive or dead since either outcome is equally probable."

Unsure whether Clark really didn't know about the cat who is dead *and* alive, Herb cleared his throat and tried to explain earnestly. "Clark, the mission you just returned from ended in tragedy for you and for Lois. Your Lois died because in this

universe she is dead. What you do not know is that at the time of her death there was a different outcome which was possible, that of Lois surviving. What I am going to tell you now is going to be hard to believe but if you think about it carefully, relating what you have already experienced and what I just told you about Schrödinger's cat, you will understand."

"You are already aware of the existence of different universes, the one where the other Lois came from which I call Prime is only one example. Have you ever wondered how these alternate universes came into existence?"

Clark shook his head in the negative and said, "I never really gave it much thought."

Herb continued, "As it turns out, we have discovered that there are certain critical actions or happenings which trigger the creation of an alternate universe."

"Now comes the critical information; my boy, you and Lois are focal points for these critical points which trigger the creation of a new universe. Each time either of you end up in a situation where your existence could be terminated there are two possible outcomes, just as with Schrödinger's cat. It is like a computer program, two possible answers, yes or no. Yes, you live or no, you don't live. In this universe that you inhabit the answer to the question of whether or not Lois lives was answered in the negative. We cannot change that. If we were to go back as you suggest and use this gem to give her your powers we could save her but in doing so we would simply be creating another universe, a universe wherein Lois is alive. Unfortunately that would not be this universe. Her survival would simply create another new universe wherein Lois is alive. Unfortunately that would not change your circumstance in the slightest."

"So what you're saying is that no matter what I do, no matter how many times I go into the past to save my Lois, Schrödinger's cat is always there. It will always result in a new universe being created and in all cases I will wind up in the situation where she is dead."

"Yes, exactly, unfortunately that is what I mean when I say that we cannot change history. The course that the history of this universe follows is one wherein the Lois of this universe does not exist. However, we can in essence bend history somewhat to make some changes. That is why I am proposing this mission. If we can find a universe wherein through some circumstance the Clark Kent of that universe does not exist, we could 'import' his Lois Lane to this universe. In that fashion we will be resolving the problem in not one but in two universes since each is missing one of the principles."

"The reason I had you identify the Sapphire Kryptonite is this. You are unique. As a result of Tempus' actions, your secret identity has been revealed. When we do find you a mate, we need to be able to endow her with super powers matching your own. Otherwise, as the human mate of Superman, she would be subject to kidnap or injury by anyone attempting to either gain control of or garner revenge against you. With this gem that problem is alleviated." Herb reached out and picked up the Sapphire Kryptonite. "Another unique thing about this Kryptonite is that your foes cannot gain control of it and use it against you. Once Lois' body has been acclimated to it only she will be able to utilize the powers it bestows. Normal Earth humans will not acquire any powers; to them it is simply a piece of jewelry."

"Now that we have the Kryptonite there is one other thing that we need. That is the Red Kryptonite. In the universe that was created by the survival of your Lois after she was shot, the Red Kryptonite was used in a laser. The laser was not built to attack you because you had not been revealed as Superman and therefore vulnerable to Kryptonite at that time. It was used to exact revenge against Lex Luthor."

Clark snapped his fingers and said, "I remember that story! I just read it a couple of months ago, uh, years ago, in October of

1992. Luthor was attacked and killed by a couple of women using a laser to slice and dice him. That weapon should be in the police evidence room still. I could probably go to Bill Henderson and have it turned over to me.”

“My boy, that would be ideal. In that way we would have all of the necessary pieces to endow any Lois you find with the powers she would need to be safe.”

“Should I go now and see Bill? It shouldn’t take too long.”

“Yes, why not do that. In that way we can be certain that all of the pieces are in place.”

“Okay, I’ll be back shortly.” Clark flew out the French doors that led to the balcony. After approximately a half hour he returned, laser in hand. Herb picked up the blue Sapphire Kryptonite and handed it to him.

“Perhaps you should place these in a secure location until we return. We may be able to use this for more than one individual, we will see. It would be nice, but not necessary, to enable all Lois Lanes to have your powers. We will have to wait and see. In your case it is necessary that your Lois be super because of your unique status.”

“You mean that I’m the \*only\* Superman that’s been exposed as Clark Kent? How can that be? Do we all wear the same uniform?”

“Yes, you do within certain parameters. There are some that have added a mask component although in most cases they have not.”

“Okay, Herb, I can see the wisdom of that. Since everyone knows that Clark Kent is Superman, the only option is to have a Superwoman as a wife.”

“I don’t know if she told you or not during one of your encounters with the Lois Lane of Prime, but she acquired Superman’s powers by an exposure to Red Kryptonite; however, in that case he was left without his powers. They were not copied, they were transferred. The secret identity she created with the help of Martha Kent and Clark was that of Ultra Woman. Martha created the uniform and Clark named her. I don’t know what name your Lois will choose to use.”

“Well, since I’m already packed there is nothing stopping us from starting this mission right away.”

“Right you are. The sooner the better! The sooner we find you a Lois Lane the sooner you will be happy. Tally Ho!” Herb jumped up from the chair he had been sitting in and pulled out a small device that looked like an oversized cell phone. It turned itself on as soon as he touched it. “Clark, you may want to bring just an overnight bag with you and don’t forget the gems. We cannot be sure of the current fashion where we are going and it may be advisable to purchase a wardrobe upon arrival. I will transport us to the outskirts of Metropolis and I will make it early morning so that you will have time to sell some of the gems and have time to find a place to stay, etc. It will then be up to you to determine just what the situation is and just how to proceed.”

Clark went to his bedroom and returned with an overnight bag into which he deposited the gemstones, all but the Sapphire Kryptonite. “Okay Herb. I’m ready.”

“Excellent. Here we go.” He punched a few keys on a pad. A doorway opened up in the air in front of them and they stepped through.

### Chapter 8 — The First Mission

May 1, 1994

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Universal Locator Designation  
Alpha 024 x Gamma 035 x Tau -180

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Herb and Clark stepped through the portal onto the sidewalk of a residential neighborhood. There were no obvious observers so they proceeded to walk down the sidewalk. They continued on

for a couple of blocks and stepped into a convenience store. They were able to see the headlines of the Star, which were proclaiming the pending nuptials between Lois Lane, late of the Planet and now with LNN, and Lex Luthor, multi-millionaire philanthropist.

Herb said, “It appears as though you may have only a short time before the incident I related.”

“How do you recommend I handle this, Herb?”

“My boy, all I can say is that I’m not sure of the results of this incident. I haven’t gone forward in this universe’s future to evaluate the outcome. You will have to simply do what you think best and hope for the correct resolution. I will be leaving you now. I will return on June first. If you could meet me on top of Mount Rushmore at noon we can see just how things have turned out.”

“Okay, Herb. I think I’ll go to Mazik’s Jewelers to sell the gems. They have a good reputation.”

“Very well. I will look for you at noon on top of Mount Rushmore.” Herb reached out and shook Clark’s hand and exited the store. Herb walked into a nearby alleyway and pulled out his TaDT. He keyed in a location, Mount Rushmore, and a date, June 1, 1994, and pressed a button. The portal opened in front of him and he stepped through to be greeted by Clark, who was alone.

“Well, how did it go, my boy?”

Clark proceeded to tell the story.

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Flashback

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After Herb left, Alt Clark proceeded to Mazik’s Jewelers where he presented some of his gemstones. After checking to make sure that the stones were not stolen, the deal was struck and Clark walked out with enough cash to see him through. He got a room at the Apollo and dropped off his overnight bag and then went to a local Cost-Mart and picked up sufficient wardrobe to cover him until June first.

Alt Clark stationed himself outside of what was left of the Planet building. He had been told by Herb that the Planet building had been the subject of a bomb blast which had put the paper out of commission. Eventually he saw himself, or rather the Clark Kent of this universe, walk past the building in a rather leisurely fashion and stroll down the street. As he was walking, a Mercedes convertible pulled up beside him and the driver beeped the horn. Alt Clark recognized Lois behind the wheel. He listened in.

Lois said, “Need a lift, big boy?” rather brightly.

Local Clark replied with a question. “Present from Luthor?”

Brightly she replied, “I borrowed it.

The sarcasm was heavy in his voice as he replied, “Well, then I guess you owe him one, don’t you?”

Clark started to walk away but Lois followed him. “Clark, come-on, get in. ... please?” in a somewhat pleading tone of voice.

After heaving a heavy sigh Clark acquiesced and reluctantly got in the car. He asked in a tone laden with sadness, “What do you want, Lois?”

Lois was almost pleading as she said, “I want you to come to my wedding!”

Sadly he replied, “I can’t!”

Again the plea was in her tone as she asked, “Why not?”

Even more sadly and with a catch in his voice he replied, “I just, I can’t.”

Lois had an offended tone as she asked, “You hate him that much, or is it me that you hate now?”

Clark, with a sad tone in his voice, said, “I could never hate you, Lois. But I’m not gonna sit there and watch you walk down the aisle with that ...”

Lois asked sarcastically, “What? Thief? Gangster?”

Psychopath? Murderer?”

Clark said equally sarcastically, “Maybe all of the above!”

Lois, getting a somewhat exasperated tone, said, “Can’t you see what is happening? You are driving us farther and farther apart!”

With a tone of finality, Clark replied, “I’m not the one doing the driving Lois, you are.” As Clark got out of the car he said, “And if you’re so sure that Lex is filled with good intentions you might want to ask him about Lexel investments and the extra insurance policy that he took out on the Daily Planet, a policy that may have made it very easy to rebuild the paper. You’re an investigative reporter Lois. Investigate.”

Unfortunately, there were other ears listening in on that conversation. After the fact, Lex Luthor and Mrs. Cox listened in on that conversation from a tape recording because the car Lois was in was bugged. Lex looked at Mrs. Cox and said, “He knows about the insurance. I wonder how much else he knows. If he passes the information on to Superman it could be a problem. Is Operation K finished?”

Mrs. Cox replied, “All ready.”

Lex replied, “Good. I think it’s about time I extended a personal invitation to Superman to attend the wedding. Contact Clark Kent and ask him to relay the message that I would like to meet with Superman tomorrow morning. I should be in the wine cellar tasting the wine to decide what to serve at the reception.”

“I’ll take care of it, Lex.”

“I know you will. I can always count on you. Lois is busy tonight. After you make that call, tell the chef to prepare dinner for two. You’ll join me of course.”

“Of course.”

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After observing the encounter in the street, Alt Clark thought he now had a handle on where things stood. From the briefing that Herb had given him he knew that the local Clark was soon to be lured into a Kryptonite trap by Lex Luthor. Alt Clark also knew that the Daily Planet team was close to having the case against Luthor ready for the police. He would need to act very soon and the best way to handle it was to meet Clark Kent, so he followed the local Clark back to his apartment on Clinton Avenue. After the local Clark had entered, Alt Clark checked to make sure they were alone and then went up and knocked. Then Alt Clark heard “Just a minute!” and waited patiently.

The door opened and the Clark of this universe’s jaw just about hit the floor. “Wh . . . wh . . . who . . . Who are you?”

The visiting Clark replied, “Believe it or not, I’m you.”

“What?!?!?!?!?”

“Can I come in?”

Continuing to stare in disbelief the local Clark stepped back, allowing Alt Clark to enter. Alt Clark said, “You might want to close the door. You know, so that nobody just walks in on us. It wouldn’t do to have both of us seen at the same time.

Local Clark looked out the door, scanning the street in both directions to ensure that they hadn’t been observed before closing the door and asking, “What are you, a clone?”

Alt Clark replied, “I guess you \*could\* say that in the sense that we share the same DNA, but not really. This is going to take some time. Are you still using your apartment as a base of operations for the Luthor investigation?”

Not completely convinced that this wasn’t a clone created by Luthor to spy on him, he decided to play it close to the vest. He pretended ignorance and asked, “Luthor investigation, what Luthor investigation?”

Alt Clark could see that he was being cautious and he couldn’t blame him. He had to give him enough information to convince him that he was on the up and up. He said, “Yeah, the one that you, Perry, Jimmy and Jack are conducting.”

Local Clark was blown away and, stunned, asked, “How, how

did you know about that?”

Alt Clark, sensing that he had his foot in the door, pressed his advantage. “Trust me, there’s a lot I know. Can you answer the question?”

Local Clark gave in. “Uh, yeah. They should be here shortly.”

Alt Clark, seizing the initiative, said, “Okay, in that case we need to go somewhere we can talk without being either seen or interrupted.” Clark spun into his uniform. “Feel up to a trip to the arctic?”

Clark marveled at what he had just witnessed. “How did you do that?”

Incredulous, Alt Clark said, “You still use closets and phone booths? Well, by using superspeed I change and it looks like a spin. Try it. It is actually quite easy.”

The local Clark gave it a try. When he came out of the spin he was missing his boots. “Not bad for the first time. Put your boots on and let’s go.”

After the local Clark had put on his boots, they both took off from the balcony straight up until they were out of sight and then started flying north. They found a convenient iceberg and settled down for a conversation.

Alt Clark started it. “Have you at any time been visited by Herb Wells?”

Local Clark said, “I don’t recognize the name. Should I?”

Alt Clark replied, “No, not necessarily. Okay, here goes. I am you, but I am you from another dimension or as we are calling them — universe. Yes, there are more than two. Many more, I’m told. Anyway, in my universe my secret identity as Clark Kent has been revealed so everybody knows that Clark Kent and Superman are one and the same. Also, in my universe there is no Lois Lane.”

Bitterly, the local Clark replied, “You may be better off that way. With what’s been happening with her and Lex Luthor . . .”

Alt Clark interrupted. “Don’t give up hope just yet. In yet another universe, when Lois was at the altar and was asked if she took Lex as her husband she said no because she realized that she was really in love with Clark Kent.”

Local Clark was blown away by this. “Really?!?!?!? At the altar?”

With assurance, Alt Clark replied, “At the altar. Immediately after that the wedding was interrupted by your team and the police.”

Local Clark was still blown away. “Wow! But she turned him down. Really?”

Trying to get him back on track, Alt Clark replied, “Really. Okay, how’s your relationship with Henderson?” He was thinking back to before he had started any of these missions and the time he had spent on the investigation he was working on with Henderson and Mayson.

Local Clark asked, “Lieutenant Henderson of MPD?” At Alt Clark’s nod he finished, “We have a good relationship.”

Alt Clark asked, “As Clark or as Superman?”

“Both.”

Now that he had him back on track, Alt Clark said, “Good. I need everything you have on Luthor so far. I’ll be you and go to Henderson. That will get the ball rolling. I’ll work with him to get the rest of the goods on Luthor.”

Alt Clark now got a serious tone in his voice which really grabbed Local Clark’s attention. “What I’m going to tell you next is going to be a little hard to take but it will be necessary in order to throw Luthor off balance. You’re going to be invited to a meeting by Luthor. He’s going to trick you into a trap. He has a Kryptonite cage that he’s going to trap you in. You need to fall into that trap so that I can work unhindered. With you trapped he will not even consider that there is a continuing problem. It’s going to be tough on you, but you really need to go through with it.”



Local Clark wasn't the slightest bit happy with the prospect of having to undergo another Kryptonite exposure. He looked unsure and swallowed heavily at that prospect.

Trying to be as persuasive as he could possibly be, Alt Clark continued, "With you distracting him I will be able to work unhindered. When the police rescue you we will say that you are really Clark Kent wearing one of my spare uniforms impersonating me so that I could get to Luthor. If we handle this the right way we can't miss."

With a sour expression, Local Clark said, "Kryptonite cage, huh? Why do I need to do that? Why don't I just tie him up and leave him in his own cage?"

Alt Clark came back with, "Because then he could have you charged with kidnapping and false imprisonment. Trust me, it'll be painful but in the long run it will work out much better this way."

Resigned to his fate, local Clark replied, "Okay, after this evening's get together I'll meet you here with the file. The wedding is in three days. Do you think you can have the goods on him within that time?"

With confidence Alt Clark replied, "As long as your Henderson has a friendly judge that can issue a warrant, it'll be a piece of cake."

"Okay, I should be back in about two hours. I'll pull all our documentation together into a coherent package with the help of Perry, Jimmy and Jack. I should be able to bring a finished product to you." The local Clark stood up, shook Alt Clark's hand and took off for Metropolis. True to his word, two hours later he was back with the file. "Here it is. We have him on insurance fraud, terroristic bombing, false accusation and a number of other things."

Alt Clark asked, "Can I clarify something? When in the Suit, how do you address Henderson?"

"I call him Lieutenant Henderson."

"How about as Clark?"

"I call him Bill."

Clark, relieved, replied, "Then I shouldn't make any mistakes when addressing him. I'll be going to see him first thing in the morning. If there's enough here to get a search warrant I have a little trick to pull which will get all the goods on Luthor. He'll be arrested and you will be rescued from the cage before they start to play the wedding march! And it'll be a funeral dirge for Luthor. Count on it."

They both took off, each heading for their respective abodes.

The next morning Superman paid a call on Lieutenant William Henderson of MPD.

As soon as he entered the precinct he was told to go on back to his office. After knocking on the door he heard Henderson say, "Come in."

As soon as he entered, Henderson asked, "Well, Superman, what can I do for you today?"

Superman replied, "Lt. Henderson, I have some information I would like to go over with you. If you think that there is enough here to convince a judge to issue a search warrant, we need to get it issued. I will help you in serving it." He handed the file to Bill and sat down in a chair while Bill flipped through the papers. As he was flipping through he let out a low whistle between his teeth.

Henderson asked, "Where did you get all of this?"

As if to state the obvious he replied, "An investigative team of Daily Planet employees built that file."

Bill Henderson, knowing Clark and Lois and what had happened between them and with Luthor, said with a little snicker, "You \*mean\* \*Kent\* don't you? I \*know\* \*he's\* motivated."

With a small chuckle Superman admitted, "He was part of the team, yes. He had a lot of help, though."

After perusing the documents thoroughly, Henderson said, "Okay, this is enough to get a search warrant but not enough for conviction."

Superman asked, "How would you like his books which list all of his 'business' transactions? Lt. Henderson, you may not realize it just yet but I have had a lot more interaction with Luthor than is generally known. I have not been able to prove what I know because I have not been in a position to get the books I am talking about through legal means. A search warrant is the legal means I have needed."

Henderson, with an air of disappointment, replied, "Unfortunately, I can't accept your help in executing the warrant. You're not a member of the force."

Superman played his hole card. "I've been thinking about that as well. What would I need to do in order for you to swear me in as a deputy?"

Bill started thinking out loud. "I don't know if I can. Maybe if you could pass the entrance exam and final written for the academy, I could probably make you a patrolman." After pondering the question for a minute he said, "Yeah, that would work. How long would it take you to study and pass those two exams?"

With a smile on his face he said, "Where are the books and how soon can you get a copy of the test for me to take?"

Bill reached behind him and pulled two books off his shelf and handed them to him. "You read these while I make a phone call."

Superman started reading the books as fast as he could turn the pages. By the time Bill had completed his call the first book was closed and laid aside. By the time the two exams had been delivered he had completed the second book. Bill had the officer that had delivered the exams stand by as an extra proctor while Superman took both tests. He handed them to the test administrator and asked him to have them graded immediately. While they waited for the results, Superman and Lt. Henderson discussed just how the warrant would be executed.

After about five minutes the phone rang. "Henderson here. ... Thank you for the quick turnaround. ... What were the scores? ... That good, huh? ... Perfect on both. I would have expected no less. Thanks again. ... The chief may call you to confirm. ... You'll be there. Thanks." He hung up by depressing the button and releasing it, dialed another number. "Chief, I have a recruit here that just passed the academy exams. Uh huh. Perfect scores on both. Could you come down and swear him in? Okay, see you in a couple of minutes. Don't forget to bring a badge. Thanks." Turning to Superman with a big smile on his face, he said, "All set. I can't wait to see the chief's face when he sees just who this new patrolman is." He started laughing out loud at the thought.

When the chief arrived he saw Superman in Henderson's office and didn't think anything of it since he was a frequent visitor. He said, "Okay, Bill, where's this special candidate that you want me to swear in?"

With a deadpan expression he replied, "He's standing right next to you."

Shocked, the chief looked at Superman and said, "You?"

Superman replied, "Yes, sir."

With a dumbfounded expression on his face the chief said, "Raise your right hand and repeat after me ..." and he proceeded to administer the oath. "Congratulations, patrolman, uh, Superman." He reached into his pocket pulled out a badge and handed it to him.

Superman asked, "Can I put this on a chain and wear it around my neck? The Suit wasn't made for sticking pins through it."

"Oh, yeah, of course, ah yes, uh, that would be acceptable."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

Still stunned by this turn of events, the chief turned to Henderson and said, "I guess I'd better get back to my office." He turned to Superman and stuck his hand out. Superman took it and shook it as the chief finished up, "It's been a pleasure, Superman. Welcome to the force."

"Thank you, Chief. I'm afraid that it will only be temporary. I have a special mission and once it's accomplished I'll be resigning from the force."

"I understand. Well, in any event, like I said, welcome to the force."

The chief left and as he did so Bill picked up the phone and called the D.A.'s office. When the phone was answered he said, "Hello, who am I speaking to please? Ah, okay, Ms. Drake. I would like your help in getting a warrant issued. ... Thank you, we'll be right over. ... A patrolman will be helping me to serve the warrant. I'll bring him along." He hung up.

Superman, with some hesitancy in his voice, asked, "Was that Mayson Drake?"

Bill asked, "Why, yes, you know her?"

Clark was remembering back to before all of this started and remembering the time he had spent with Mayson. He was remembering that as he was leaving she had confessed that she was in love with him and he was thinking that they just might have been able to work it out. But of course, that had been another Mayson Drake. There was a rather far away expression on his face as he said, "No, not really. It would be too long a story. Shall we go?"

### Chapter 9 — The First Mission Continues.- Outsmarting Luthor

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Universal Locator Designation  
Alpha 024 x Gamma 035 x Tau -180  
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When they arrived at Mayson's office she had her nose almost literally buried in her paperwork. It was almost a minute before she looked up from her work to see who was in her office. When she did she got a somewhat sour look as if she had bitten into an unripe lemon. "Henderson, why did you bring \*him\* here? You know I don't like this, this ... this, \*vigilante\*."

Bill, with a look like the cat that had just caught the canary, replied, "Mayson Drake, please allow me to introduce you to Patrolman Superman, the newest member of the MPD."

Startled, she replied, "What did you say? Did I hear you right? Patrolman Superman? He's joined the MPD?"

"Yep, passed his exams and was sworn in this morning by the chief. He even has a badge. He just needs to get a neck chain for it."

This outcome had blown Mayson away. Her entire mindset about this man had been changed in an instant. She reached up and unclasped her necklace and handed it to him. "I would be honored if you would use this."

Superman reached out and accepted the necklace. He threaded it through an opening in his badge and hung it around his neck. It rode a lot higher on his chest than the chain had on Mayson's but that was to be expected since his neck was much larger. "Thank you, Ms. Drake, I appreciate it."

Mayson gave him a very close appraisal. Now that she didn't have the filter of vigilante to look through she could see him for what he was and she had to grudgingly admit that she liked what she saw. "I'm always happy to help a member of the force. Now, what can I do for MPD?"

Henderson placed the file on her desk and said, "The crew at the Daily Planet has accumulated this evidence of crimes being committed by Lex Luthor. We need a search warrant so that we can get the corroborating evidence so that we can nail him once and for all."

"Well, let's just see what you've got." She found herself looking at Superman, even as she was listening to and speaking with Henderson. Finally she realized just what she was doing and tore her eyes from him and started going through the file. She found herself glancing up from the file frequently to look at him and mentally chastened herself for not paying attention to her job and being distracted by this healthy male specimen. She could feel her pulse starting to race the more she looked. She thought, <How can a badge make so much difference?> When she had gone through the entire folder she said, "Looks good to me. Let me write up the petition." As she did so she asked, "Do you have a particular judge you want to approach?"

Henderson replied, "As long as he is not in Luthor's pocket, it doesn't matter."

As she finished up the petition she was chagrined as she replied, "I'll pretend I didn't hear that." She thought for a second and then replied, "I would recommend Judge Lewis. He should be in chambers right now. Let's go see him." So saying, she picked up the file and the petition and led the way to the judge's chambers. On the way she walked beside Superman and struck up a conversation. "What made you decide to finally give up being a vigilante and join the force?"

Superman turned to look at her and then replied in a deep voice, "This was too important an issue to allow that to prevent me from helping the force. I have some unique talents that will be useful in executing the warrant."

Affected by him in a way that she had never experienced before, she shyly asked, "What are you doing this evening? I know this little Italian place, just around the corner, Travaglini's. Would you consider joining me for dinner?"

Shaking his head in the negative, Superman replied more softly with a tinge of regret, "Mayson, I really don't think that it would be in your best interest to be seen dating Superman. Just think of the notoriety. You wouldn't have any more privacy." And Clark knew exactly how that felt.

"I might just be willing to risk it."

The conversation ended at this point as they entered the Judge's secretary's office.

After being announced by his secretary, they were let into his office. Henderson let Mayson handle the request. The judge was startled to say the least when Superman entered his office, even more so when he saw the badge suspended by a gold chain around his neck. The judge stood up and extended his hand to Superman and said, "So, you finally joined the force. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Your Honor. I am proud to be with Metropolis' finest." He shook the judge's hand.

The judge settled back in his chair and said, "Okay, let's see just what we have here." As he went through the file he made various "Mmmm" and "Oh" and "Aha" sounds. He read through the petition and pulled out a form. "How do you want this made out? If you are looking for documents it needs to be different from drugs and drug paraphernalia."

Henderson spoke up. "Documents, Your Honor."

The judge made the appropriate notations and signed with a flourish. "Here you go. Go get him."

They chorused, "Thank you, Your Honor."

After leaving his chambers, they dropped Mayson off at her office. Mayson handed Superman her card on which she had written her cell number and said, "Give me a call sometime. I still think I'd like to get to know you better."

He replied, "I'm sorry, Mayson, I've been thinking more about our earlier conversation and I really can't become involved with women. They would become susceptible to kidnap and injury were they known to be associated with me."

"What about Lois Lane? Everybody knows about your association with her."

“Right now she is supposed to be marrying Lex Luthor. Of course she will have a hard time doing that when he’s in jail. I think that you will find that once Luthor is out of the way Clark Kent will be the one associated with her, not me.”

“I guess I can see that. It’s a shame. You could come to my place, I make extremely good lasagna.”

“If I change my mind, maybe I’ll give you a call. Goodbye, Mayson.”

“Bye.”

When they arrived back in Bill’s office, he called for detective Muggervin. When Muggervin showed up, he briefed him. Henderson and Superman were going to execute the search warrant. Muggervin would gather a squad and raid Luthor Tower and attempt to arrest Lex Luthor. Muggervin left to gather his squad. Superman and Henderson moved to the alley behind the building. Superman picked him up and flew them to the balcony of Lex’s office suite. Lex was out of the office so Superman opened the French doors and he and Henderson entered.

Superman used his x-ray vision to scan the walls for hidden safes. He found several, most of which were lead lined. “Lt. Henderson ...”

“Superman, I think we can drop the title. Please call me Bill. It’ll be a lot quicker.”

“Okay, Bill, I see several safes. Most of them are lined with lead so I do not know what is inside. My concern is that Luthor might have some Kryptonite in them. If he does it could incapacitate me.”

Henderson asked, “Can you pull the entire safe out of the wall, without opening it, I mean?”

“I should be able to.”

Henderson directed, “Okay, do that with the first one. When you open it stand off to the side. If there’s Kryptonite inside and if you feel the effects close it. I’ll check the other contents. If any of the others have it inside we can consolidate it all in one and you can get rid of it. I don’t care if it might be considered evidence. If it’s dangerous to you, I want you to get rid of it.”

“Thank you, Bill. Okay, here goes the first one.” He pushed aside the concealing artwork and driving his hands into the wall on either side of the safe, grasped it and pulled it out of the wall.

He placed it on Luthor’s desk and, standing off to the side, ripped the door off its hinges. Bill Henderson looked inside. “Does Kryptonite look like a green, glowing rock?”

“Yes. It does.”

“Stay back behind the lead shielding. I’m going to remove the papers and leave the green rock in here and then replace the door.” Bill removed the papers and placed them on the desk. He then replaced the door as best as he could. While he was doing this Superman pulled the next safe out of the wall. They handled this one the same way. They followed this procedure for each of the safes. When they had all been opened and the documents removed, Bill had Superman stand in a far corner while he transferred all the Kryptonite into a single safe. He had this one standing on end and when he placed the door back on said, “Okay, seal it with your heat vision.”

Superman did just that and as Bill was picking up all the books and other documents, Luthor returned, in a hurry. He was very surprised to see Henderson and especially Superman in his office when he entered. He also saw his numerous safes on his desk and his secret books spread out. Seeing that, he knew that the jig was up.

He sputtered, “What are you doing in here? You can’t come in here without a warrant.”

Henderson slapped a piece of paper into Luthor’s hand and said, “You’ve been served.” Addressing Superman, Henderson said, “Patrolman, take him into custody.”

Addressing Luthor again, he said, “Luthor, you’re under arrest for crimes too numerous to list.” Superman grabbed him.

Luthor, realizing from the grip that this was Superman and not just someone in the Suit, said, “Whaa, how, where? How did you get here? I thought I had you locked up!”

Superman replied, “The joke’s on you, Luthor. You see, actually you have Clark Kent locked up. He was acting as a decoy so that I could help the police, but thanks for reminding me.” Superman turned to Bill and said, “Lt. Henderson, you will find Clark Kent in the wine cellar in a Kryptonite-plated cage which was designed to hold me. Please have a couple of the men go down and release him. For obvious reasons I would like to stay as far away from there as I can.”

Bill said, “Lex Luthor, you are under arrest for charges too numerous to mention to which will be added kidnap and false imprisonment.”

About this time the squad under command of Muggervin arrived with Mrs. Cox and Nigel St. John in tow. Henderson pointed at Luthor and said, “Cuff him,” and then dispatched three men to the wine cellar to release Clark Kent from the Kryptonite cage. They managed to return with Clark before Henderson had wrapped everything up to leave. ‘Clark’ was looking very pale and weak

After being released from the Kryptonite cage, Clark had needed to be assisted by the officers because of his weakened condition. By the time they were in the elevator they were far enough away from the Kryptonite that he started to recover somewhat. By the time they were back on the floor containing Luthor’s office he was able to stand on his own, but just barely. When they entered the office, searching for something to support him that wouldn’t be too terribly obvious, Clark moved over and leaned against the conference table, crossing his arms as he did so. He noted a look that the other Superman gave him and he reached up and mussed up his hair somewhat.

Alt Superman gave him a look of approval as he did so. Now he looked more like Clark Kent in a superman Suit than Superman.

Seeing an opportunity to build up his secret identity, Superman addressed him, “Thank you, Clark for impersonating me so that Luthor was distracted. It gave me the free hand I needed to really get the goods on him. He should be going away, permanently.”

Just as he finished speaking Lois Lane charged in. She saw the police squad, Luthor, Nigel and Mrs. Cox in cuffs and ... two ... Supermen. She spotted Henderson and in an irritated tone asked, “What’s going on?”

Henderson spoke up. “Lois, Superman, here ...” he indicated the one with the badge, “joined the force so that we could prosecute a search warrant on Luthor. We now have the goods on all of his activities.”

Superman spoke up. “Lois, your fiancée has been identified as ‘The Boss’. He has been the criminal mastermind behind nearly all of the rackets here in Metropolis.”

Looking back and forth between the two individuals in the super costumes, she challenged the one that had just spoken, “If you’re Superman, then who’s that?” She pointed at Clark.

Superman responded in his take-charge mode, “Lois, that happens to be Clark Kent. Clark wanted to help out and volunteered to be my stand in. He knew that it was potentially dangerous because Luthor could have killed him at any time, but he volunteered anyway. I loaned him one of my Suits and he took my place in a Kryptonite cage Luthor had made to trap me in the wine cellar. He walked into that trap to make Luthor think he had captured and imprisoned Superman. I do think he has suffered some from the ordeal.” Superman pulled a pair of glasses out of a pouch in the cape of the Suit that Clark was wearing and placed them on Clark’s face.

As he had been speaking, Lois had been looking back and forth between the two of them, comparing them visually. She was

having a hard time reconciling what she was hearing with what she was seeing. Occasionally she had had suspicions about Clark and Superman. Clark's frequent disappearances and lame excuses. The times that Superman had left town and Clark had also left, but here was visual proof that they were actually two separate people. It was incontrovertible, undeniable, and unbelievable. Superman placing the glasses on Clark's face was the final blow.

Finally coming out of the stupor that this information had thrown her into, Lois shouted, "Clark!!!", as she rushed over and threw her arms around him. She started crying as she started kissing his face. After a few seconds she pulled back and said, "The reason I'm here is that I was coming in here to tell Luthor that the wedding was off! I've been such a fool! I almost made the biggest mistake of my entire life! I was at home thinking about what life would be like with Luthor and trying out the name, Lois Luthor, Lois Lane-Luthor when suddenly it came to me that none of them sounded right. What burst out of my mouth next was Lois Lane-Kent and it just sounded so right and I started to cry. I realized that marrying Luthor would be wrong because I didn't love him. I really loved you! I needed you! I didn't want to live without you! Clark, you're really the one I'm in love with. You've been my best friend for quite a while now and I couldn't bear to lose you. Somehow, somehow you stopped being just my best friend; you became my best friend and the man I was in love with." She was crying as she was saying all of this.

Superman cleared his throat and once he had their attention he spoke up. "If I might make a suggestion, Lois, you recently purchased a wedding gown didn't you?"

Still with tears in her eyes and her arms around Clark's neck she tore her eyes away from Clark's face to look at Superman and replied, "Yes, I did."

Superman continued, "All of the invitations have been sent out and the hall has been decorated?"

She nodded to indicate that he was correct.

Superman offered, "You know, you could still use it. You would just have to have a different groom."

Turning to the local Clark he offered, "If you need a best man, I'm available, as long as I don't need to wear a tux."

Clark weakly replied "I'd like that." Turning to Lois he said, "Shall we take him up on his offer? Will you marry me?"

Still having tears in her eyes, but this time they were tears of joy, Lois said, "What took you so long to ask? Of course I'll marry you."

Chuckling, Clark said as he waved an arm to indicate those present, "Well, I guess its official; I've got an entire squad of Metropolis' finest and Superman as witnesses. Let's go get the license."

Superman interrupted to ask, "Uh, Clark, don't you think that you should change back into your own clothes and give me back the Suit first? We wouldn't want anyone else mistaking you for me and trying to test your invulnerability."

Looking down and seeing that he was still in the Suit the local Clark said, "Yeah, good idea. Can you give me a lift back to my apartment?"

Lois said, "You two go ahead. Clark, I'll drive over and pick you up as soon as I can get out of here. We can go get the license this afternoon. The wedding is scheduled for the day after tomorrow. You're all invited." Looking over at Lex who was standing there fuming from not only being arrested but being jilted as well, she said, "Except you, of course, Lex. I think you'll be tied up."

Superman picked up the lead-lined safe that contained the Kryptonite and he and Clark walked out onto the balcony and then Superman picked him up and they took off for Clark's apartment.

When they landed they moved inside. Clark said, "I don't

know how to thank you. I never expected this." The local Clark went to his closet and pulled out a suit to put on.

Superman offered, "After the wedding the three of us can go somewhere and I can explain everything to both of you."

Laughing, the local Clark said, "I don't think Lois would appreciate the Arctic."

Superman was also laughing as he replied, "I think that Superman will offer to take you to your honeymoon resort. I'm going to make arrangements for Hawaii for you as my wedding gift. You should have your powers back in about 24 to 36 hours. I'll fly Lois and you can follow in a few minutes to make it look like I came back for you. We'll make the first stop a secluded beach where we can talk without being interrupted. As soon as Lois is here I'll take off. In this lead-lined safe is the Kryptonite Luthor had placed in his safes as traps for you. I'm going to take it up and launch it out of the solar system."

Local Clark was still changing when Lois arrived so Alt Superman answered the door.

Lois hadn't been expecting this and was surprised, but not startled to see him. She asked, "Where's Clark?" She still hadn't reconciled the fact that she had seen both of them together. For all the time that Superman had been around, she had never seen Superman and Clark at the same time and in the back of her mind this had been bothering her. All of those lame excuses he had given for leaving, especially when they had been in serious discussions about their relationship and just where it was going and suddenly, there was Superman dealing with an emergency. The puzzle pieces had been starting to fit together and then suddenly, somebody had bumped the table and the puzzle was scattered all over the floor. She was going to have to start all over and the picture was different now.

Local Clark heard her and shouted from his bedroom, "I'm just finishing changing. Out in a sec."

She nodded her head and thought, <Yep, back to square one.> Looking back at Superman she thought, <I'm glad he helped Clark get the goods on Lex. If I hadn't already decided that marrying Lex would be a mistake, they would have saved me from myself. I'm glad Clark didn't give up on me. After that talk in the car I wasn't so sure.>

The local Clark finished changing and joined Lois and Superman in the living room. Superman said, "Lois, a little bird told me that you have always wanted to honeymoon in Hawaii, so, as my wedding present to you I'm paying for your dream honeymoon."

Lois let out a delighted squeal and threw her arms around his neck and gave him a kiss on the cheek. She said, "I don't know how to thank you for everything you've done for us. You've always been here for me, us, and now you helped rescue me again, this time from myself." She looked over at Clark with love in her eyes and said, "You helped me to realize just who was really important in my life. I know, I had a schoolgirl crush on you for the longest time, but I know what I have with Clark is not a schoolgirl crush, it's true love."

Alt Superman said, "Well, we all have some things to do. I have some Kryptonite to dispose of and a honeymoon to book. You guys have to go get a license. I guess I'll see you at the wedding." He picked up the safe and exited from the balcony. Superman flew up into the stratosphere and launched the safe as hard as he could and watched it disappear into the depths of space. Then he flew to Hawaii and made the reservations for Lois and Clark's honeymoon. When he returned he did a patrol and then returned to the Apollo.

## Chapter 10 — The First Mission — A Revelation

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 024 x Gamma 035 x Tau -180

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The wedding went off without a hitch. With the change of groom a number of people that were not planning on attending changed their minds and the hall was pushed to the limits of its capacity to hold everyone. It had given the visiting Superman unbounded pleasure to be able to fly Jonathan and Martha Kent to Metropolis for the occasion. Before the flight he spent some time with them and told them his story.

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The day before the wedding

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The local Clark had phoned his parents to inform them of the changes that had occurred. Of course they had seen the headlines in the Star about Luthor's arrest. But, and it was a big but, they didn't know about the visiting Superman. When Alt Superman arrived to fly them to Metropolis they greeted him as if he were their son.

Jonathan said, "Clark, we are so happy for you. You have finally gotten your wish. Now that you're marrying Lois you will have a family of your own and we will have the daughter we always hoped for."

Feeling somewhat awkward, Alt Superman said, "I'm sorry, Clark should have told you. I'm not him. I mean I'm me and he is him and he's your Clark and I'm another Clark. It's kinda confusing. Can we go sit down and maybe I can explain."

After the door was closed Superman spun into civilian clothes. The Kents took this in and Martha, with awe in her voice, said, "You're \*not\* our boy, are you?"

After sitting down he said, "No, I'm not. Clark, your Clark that is, is in Metropolis still recovering from a massive Kryptonite exposure. I'm actually visiting here from another dimension. That sounds kind of science fiction but it's true. I guess the easiest way to explain it is like this: Think of an onion. If you slice across an onion and look at it from the top it is made up of many layers. The universes are like that, many layers or universes side by side. I'm from one of the other universes. I came here to help your Clark defeat Lex Luthor. He was supposed to die in the trap that Luthor set for him."

He told them about his background and when he finished they welcomed him to the family and treated him as if he were their son's twin brother and expressed sadness that he would be leaving them soon.

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After the reception

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Lois and Clark said farewell to the guests. Everyone saw Superman standing beside Clark as his best man, and they had all posed for the pictures so there would never be a question of Clark Kent being Superman again. With a satisfied farewell smile, Superman picked up their luggage and flew it to Hawaii. He returned in a few minutes and picked up Lois and flew off.

As anticipated, local Clark had recovered his super powers, so he exited the building ostensibly to meet Superman when he returned for him but in actuality so that he could change and fly to meet the visiting Superman and Lois. They had discussed the way they should handle this so Clark landed out of sight and changed back into civvies. Alt Superman then picked him up and returned to Lois. Superman had prepared for this meeting. He had built some chairs and an awning. He had even brought some refreshments.

He started it. "Lois, you're probably wondering why I have asked you and Clark here for a meeting."

"Well, yeah, I am. I presume that it's so that you can explain just who the hell you are."

Alt Superman hadn't been prepared for this kind of response and was taken aback. He was a wordsmith but this had startled him so that all that came out was, "What? What did you say?"

"Just who the hell are you? You're \*a\* Superman but you're not \*my\* Superman. I knew that immediately, but if you're \*not\* Superman, then who is?"

With an arched eyebrow he looked over at local Clark. Local Clark looked back at him with a dumbfounded expression.

Looking back at Lois with a surprised expression, he asked, "How do you know that I'm \*not\* your Superman?"

Lois said, "Little things. The errors in the conversation while we were flying. The way it felt in your arms it was just a little ... off."

Looking at local Clark again, alt Clark said, "Very perceptive. I should have expected nothing less. She's just like my Lois." He shook his head sadly.

With a tone of sympathy in his voice, local Clark replied, "I'm so sorry. It's such a shame that had to happen. You know, a thought just occurred to me. If you hadn't been here in time, if I had died in that cage, you could have taken over."

Lois had been taking in this conversation. She spoke up. "I realize I'm not part of this 'old-boy's club' network, but could you let me in on this conversation? I feel like I'm being left out because I don't have all the inside information."

Alt Clark squared his shoulders and admitted, "Okay, Lois, you're right. We need to let you in. You are correct, I'm not \*your\* Superman. I'm a visiting Superman. I came because of the Luthor situation. There was a distinct possibility that your Superman would have died in that Kryptonite cage trap Luthor had set for him. I came to help your Superman so that he wouldn't die. The Lois Lane of my universe was killed on the illegal arms investigation in the Congo. I'm on my way to meet another Lois, but right now, I'm helping out in other universes."

She looked over at local Clark and said, "The way he's talking, it sounds like he's saying you could have died in that cage."

The local Clark, with a very thoughtful look on his face, turned to the visiting Superman and said, "You know, It might just have worked. You might have had to start all over though. You really \*don't\* know her all that well."

Alt Clark replied, "That wasn't the object here. You had to be saved."

Lois, feeling increasingly frustrated by being left out of the conversation that was going on right in front of her, asked, "Clark, what are you saying?"

The local Clark looked at Lois and said, "I'm right. It might have worked. If I \*had\* died in that cage he \*might\* have been able to pick up where I left off."

Lois was dumbfounded. She blurted out, "But that cage was a trap for Superman! How could you have died in it?"

Local Clark, with a placating tone said, "Lois, I'm sure you've had your suspicions all along. When we were seen together it probably threw you way off." With the look and demeanor of an individual bravely standing up to face a firing squad, he stood up; instead of putting on a blindfold, though, he took off his glasses and started to spin. He became a blur that shortly turned into bright primary colors and when he stopped Superman stood in his place. Apparently calm, he still had a slight vibrato in his voice as he confessed, "Lois, I'm Superman."

As this was happening Lois gasped and just sat there staring for several seconds as the facts settled in. The puzzle that she had been assembling for so long, which had metaphorically been knocked off the table by the appearance of this 'Superman', suddenly reassembled itself and all of the parts dropped into place. Then she started getting angry. He could see the play of emotions on her face. As she stood to confront him, she said in an exasperated tone, "You lying ... two faced, I never realized that that aphorism could be taken so literally before ... conniving so and so. How can I \*trust\* you?" The tone of her voice was escalating all the time she was speaking. "All this time ... you've

been \*lying\* to me. I've told you a lot of my innermost secrets! Oh ... my ... God. All those times I told you about how much I \*cared\* for \*Superman\*! You must have been laughing at me the whole time ... how \*dare\* you do that to me!" She hit her final high note as she ended and broke down into tears.

Trying to soothe her, Clark protested, "Lois, that's not how it was! I only told you little fibs to cover my absences."

With hurt and humiliation in her voice she wailed, "All those times you used what I had told you as Superman against me as Clark ... and vice versa." She started to cry harder.

Local Superman tried to calm her, "Now Lois, calm down. We can work this out." As he was speaking he had been closing the distance between them. When he was close enough he gently reached out and gathered her into his arms. At first she shrugged off his attempts to hold her but he persisted and eventually he was able to fold her up in his strong arms as her tears soaked the front of his Suit. He started kissing the top of her head and then her forehead. Slowly he worked his way down the side of her face, kissing away her tears until he finally captured her lips in a kiss. She finally stopped crying and melted into his arms. He pulled back long enough to ask, "Can you ever forgive me?"

With a soft sob still in her voice she replied, "If you keep kissing me like that I might just consider it."

Happily he replied, "You can look forward to a lifetime of those kinds of kisses."

As her arms were moving up and around his neck she said, "In that case, yes, you're forgiven. Kiss me some more."

After a few minutes the visiting Superman cleared his throat to get their attention. They broke from their clinch and looked at him. They had obviously forgotten he was even there.

"I hate to interrupt, but there's more that you guys need to know."

With wonder in her voice, Lois asked, "There's more?"

"Yes, Lois, there's more."

Lois and Superman both sat down. This time she sat in his lap.

"Something that you don't know about your relationship is that the two of you are fated to be together. You were never meant to be apart. You are what are called Soul Mates. Your souls are bound throughout eternity to be together." Then he filled them in on the details of the soul mates connection.

Alt Clark continued, "You know, this is the third universe I've been to, my own and two others. I've been with two other Lois Lanes and Clark Kents. In the other universe, when I last saw them they had been married for over a year and writing partners for four years. I was recruited to help them because he had been trapped in time. We managed to rescue him and bring them back together. If the two of you are anything like them you are going to be deliriously happy together. That said, I'm happy for you."

After a little more discussion the visiting Superman said, "I think I'm going to leave you now. Enjoy your honeymoon and don't worry about anything. I'll fill in for you until you are back. Make sure you are seen here while I'm active in Metropolis; it should help with the secret identity for us both to be seen two different places at the same time. My ride will be coming so I'll be leaving in a couple of weeks. In the meantime, make the best of it. I'm staying at the Apollo as Charlie King if you need to get in touch with me. In case I don't see you again, enjoy."

Lois walked over to him and, putting her arms around his neck, she gave him a kiss on the cheek and said, "Thank you. I had decided that Clark was the man for me and not Lex. If not for you he might have been killed."

As she stepped away the local Superman stepped up and shook his hand and said, "I don't know how to thank you."

Laughing, he replied, "You could name your first born after me."

Laughing, Lois said, "Clark Junior, CJ, I like it."

With a wave of farewell, the visiting Superman took off and headed east.

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As he was nearing Metropolis he saw a pall of smoke and as he got nearer he saw that it was originating in the rail yard. From altitude he evaluated the situation. He saw the fire chief off to one side so he headed that way and landed near him.

The press contingent was gathered in an area near the chief and among them were Ralph Pinado and Jimmy Olsen. When Jimmy saw Superman he started snapping pictures.

The chief turned toward him and said, "Superman, I'm sure glad you're here. We have a situation developing that I don't know if we are going to be able to handle. Here's the situation. We have a train on a siding that is a string of tank cars filled with various combustible liquids. One of the oil tanks either sprang a leak or someone opened a valve."

"When we responded it was going to be a contain and cleanup operation, but somehow there was a spark and that ignited the liquid. Our foam truck is on the way, but until it gets here all we have to fight the fire with is some Purple-K dry chemical, and not much of that. Water is ineffective since all that does is spread the fire around. Bottom line, we have what started as a major spill which is now a fire. We can handle that as far as it goes. We are containing it until the foam truck gets here; the problem is that before we got the containment in place the fire had spread under several of the other cars." At this point the chief was interrupted by a very loud hissing noise as a pressure relief valve on one of the cars popped and started venting vapor which immediately ignited and became a blazing pillar of flame. The noise was like a mighty rushing wind, like the sound of a tornado or a jet engine, up close.

The chief had to shout now to be heard over the sound as he continued, "Here's the problem, all of these cars are filled with combustible liquids like that! I expect as the liquid inside heats up and expands the pressure will build just as it did in that car! If we have a failure of a single pressure relief valve we could have a BLEVE (2) and I don't want my men to be around if that happens! If that happened it would be like a miniature atomic explosion without the radiation. Superman, is there any way you can move that tank away from here where it won't cause much damage?"

From past experience working with the fire service in his world, Superman knew what BLEVE stood for and knew that they were facing one of the most dangerous situations faced by the fire service. A Boiling Liquid Expanding Vapor Explosion was one of the touchiest and worst dangers to deal with within the fire service.

Superman shook his head before replying, "Sorry, Chief, I've x-rayed the tank and if I attempt to move it in any way, the structure is so weakened from the heat that it will rupture immediately. If I try to cool it with my super cold breath I won't be able to cool it evenly and the resulting shrinkage of the metal where I do will cause a rupture. I can't move it and I can't cool it. We will have to rely on your methods of using water to cool the tank.

With an air of determination, knowing that Superman would be unable to help in this particular situation and he was going to have to rely on his own resources, the chief quickly came up with a plan and moved to execute it. He grabbed his radio and depressing the transmit switch he shouted into it, "Ladder 5!"

When he released the switch he heard, "Ladder 5."

The chief keyed the mic again and shouted, "Move Ladder 5 into a position so that we can put a man up top and direct a stream of water on that tank that's venting to cool it off."

"Ladder 5 — 10-4!"

As the chief and Superman watched, Ladder 5 moved from

the staging area into position. The ladder crew was very efficient. Within 45 seconds of getting into position, the supports were being extended and the ladder locks released. A fireman in full bunker gear dragged a hose with him as he ascended the structure and tied the nozzle off. Once the supports were in place, the ladderman started elevating and traversing the ladder, paying out the hose as it went up. As soon as it was in position the line was charged and the fireman started playing the water on the rail car. The fire plume was at the other end of the car and on the opposite side but it was so intense that he was really feeling the heat. If not for the Nomex™ bunker gear, his clothes might just have ignited.

The chief watched with approval as the operation was completed in record time, a testament to the training and drills conducted by the station. He grabbed his radio again and called Station 5's captain. "Station 5?"

"Captain 5."

"Well done, Station 5! I've never seen better! Excellent teamwork."

"Station 5, 10-4."

The chief now called Station 3's captain, "Station 3! Move your snorkel into position to cover the next car in the line! If we can prevent it from getting hot enough to release, we'll be ahead of the game!"

"This is Captain 3, 10-4!"

Immediately the chief saw Snorkel 3 move from the staging area and pull into position adjacent to the next car. While they were in the process of hooking to the hydrant they started positioning the snorkel. By the time it was in position the hose was hooked up and the water was turned on. The engineer directed the water on the next rail car.

The chief got on the radio again, "Captain 3!"

"Captain 3."

"Well done, captain! Keep that water flowing!"

Suddenly there was silence again. The vent valve had closed unexpectedly. The chief said, "Okay, it looks like our efforts are paying off. We've cooled it sufficiently that the internal pressure is below the relief valve setting."

Superman used his x-ray vision to try to determine the condition of the tank that had been venting. When he did, he was appalled at what he saw. He turned to the chief and he couldn't conceal the concern in his voice as he said, "Chief, the liquid inside that rail car is still boiling furiously! The pressure hasn't gone down, the valve has failed! In my opinion we only have minutes at most before it \*will\* BLEVE!"

The chief grabbed his radio and shouted, "All stations ... FALL BACK! I repeat ... FALL BACK. BLEVE IMMINENT! I REPEAT BLEVE IMMINENT!"

As they watched they saw the firemen start to fall back, retreating to the staging area and clustering behind the heavy rescue trucks since they afforded the most protection. Superman saw that the man at the end of the ladder had apparently not heard the order. He took off and reached the man, picked him up and headed skyward just seconds before the skin of the tank car ruptured, releasing all of the liquid that had been contained as a vapor, which became a huge ball of fire. The ball of fire expanded and expanded from the tank car outward until it filled a volume of hundreds of cubic meters. The end of the aerial ladder from Ladder 5 was entirely within the ball of fire. If Superman hadn't gotten that man to safety, he would have been burned alive.

After the initial ball of fire had passed, the remaining liquid residue continued to burn. Superman landed behind the heavy rescue truck and deposited his burden among his brothers. Then he reported back to the chief.

The chief said, "Thanks for saving that man. His wife will be happy to see him come in the door tonight. Is there anything you

can do about the remaining cars?"

Superman responded, "I was too late to do anything about that car, but I may be able to do something about the rest. I could move them down the track some so that they are away from the flames."

"That would be a big help. If they don't overheat they won't BLEVE."

Superman took off and landed behind the caboose. Spinning the brake wheel, he released the brake and, grasping the rear coupler, started to pull the train in reverse away from the area of flames. Once all of the cars were in the clear everyone started to breathe a lot easier.

After moving the train to a safe location, Superman reported back to the chief. "Chief, is there anything more I can do for you?"

The chief replied, "No, Superman, I don't think there is. Thanks for the help." He offered his hand and Superman took it and shook it.

There were shouts coming from the press corps, asking Superman for an interview.

Superman went over and addressed them. "I will take a couple of questions." Spotting Jimmy Olsen in the pack and realizing that he must be freelancing since the Planet was closed he selected him.

Happy that Superman had chosen him, Jimmy asked, "Superman, can you explain what happened?"

Superman replied, "I think the chief would be more qualified to answer that question than me." He turned to the chief and said, "Chief, can you answer this young man's question?"

The chief stepped over and said, "Gladly. What you have witnessed was what is called BLEVE. BLEVE stands for Boiling Liquid Expanding Vapor Explosion. The fire under the tank heated up the liquid inside like in a pressure cooker and caused it to boil. The harder it boiled, the higher the pressure inside became. When the tank couldn't take the pressure any more, it ruptured. When that happened, all of the vapor was released and it burst into flame. If Superman hadn't been here the man out on the end of the ladder would have been fried. That's the real story here. Superman rescued my man when no one else could have."

The news hounds were all writing furiously.

Ralph Pinado spoke up. "What took you so long to show up, Superman?"

Superman replied, "As you know, Clark Kent and Lois Lane were married a little while ago. If I had heard about this I would have left the wedding and responded immediately; however, I didn't know about this incident until I returned from dropping them off in Hawaii for their honeymoon."

Ralph continued, "How does it feel to be beaten out for Lois Lane's hand by Clark Kent? Everybody knows that you had the hots for her."

Superman replied, "You are very much mistaken! I have always had a professional relationship with Lois Lane and Clark Kent is one of my closest friends. I am very happy for them and I wish them a long and happy marriage."

While all of this was going on, the paparazzi had spotted Lois and Clark in Hawaii. Since the story about Luthor had been in the papers for a couple of days, they had started hounding Lois and Clark to get a statement from them about Luthor, so there were plenty of pictures and eyewitnesses that Lois and Clark were in Hawaii when the BLEVE occurred at the rail yard.

Lois and Clark were in Hawaii for two weeks on their honeymoon and shortly after their return it was time for Alt Superman's ride. Before Herb showed up he had one last meeting with local Lois and Clark at 344 Clinton.

"Well, you guys, I'll be leaving shortly." Addressing Lois, he said, "It looks like you have reconciled your problems with Clark."

Lois had a happy smile on her face as she said, “I just couldn’t stay mad at him. We had an absolutely wonderful honeymoon. I don’t know how to thank you. It was wonderful to not have to worry about being interrupted by emergencies.”

Alt Superman chuckled and said, “Glad to have been of service. Listen, you guys, don’t be surprised if in the future Herb chooses to visit. When he does, he may have a gift for you, an extra wedding present, if you will.”

Local Clark, his curiosity piqued, asked, “What would that be?”

Alt Clark said, “I’m not at liberty to disclose that right now, but if you see him, you will appreciate the present. Trust me.”

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End Flashback

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## Chapter 11 — The Second Mission

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 024 x Gamma 035 x Tau -180

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After Clark finished relating his adventure, Herb said, “Well, my boy, this worked out just fine. You managed to save him from Luthor’s death trap, brought them together and you were able to see them happily married. How delightful! I must say that \*was\* a success.”

“I do feel good about the outcome. To see them together was like seeing the other Lois and Clark. They are so happy together, and after I told them about the soul mates thing they were even happier.

Rubbing his hands together, Herb asked, “Well, are you ready for the next mission?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess. I hope that this one will work out for them again like the last time.”

“Well, here we go. I have programmed the universe and time into my device here and we can start your next adventure.”

Almost as an afterthought, Herb asked, “Do you have any jewels left?”

“I should have enough to cover me for a few days without any problem.”

“In that case I guess we can start right away.” Herb pulled out his TaDT and set the coordinates for the desired place and time.

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 025 x Gamma 120 x Tau 086

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They stepped through and Clark found himself on the same street as the last time they had moved through the portal. They proceeded to the same convenience store as the last time and checked the paper. What they saw was a headline about Jimmy Olsen being arrested for murder. Clark picked up the paper for a closer look. He turned to Herb and said, “This doesn’t look like something that would put Lois in danger. Are you sure you didn’t get the wrong time or things aren’t lining up the way they did in Prime?”

Herb said, “Oh my, my, my, let me see. No, this is correct. During the investigation, while they are trying to clear Jimmy, there is a chance that Lois will die. We are at the correct time. In fact, you may not have very much time in which to act, but I already know you succeed.”

With a resigned expression, Clark gave in, but first he asked, “You say I succeed; what if I do nothing?”

With a pensive expression Herb replied, “If you fail, the Lois of this universe could die. Do you want to risk that?”

Giving in, Clark replied, “Okay, I’ll stay and see what I can do.”

“As usual I will meet you in a month. I’ll meet you January

10th, 10 am Pacific, on the pier that the Midway Museum is tied up to in San Diego.” Herb pulled out his TaDT and entered the coordinates as he walked into the alley nearby. He stepped through the portal onto the pier and almost literally bumped into Clark, who was looking at the aircraft carrier with some tourists who were taking pictures. He waited until they were finished and walking away before approaching him and asking, “Well, my boy, how did it go?”

“Well, there wasn’t as much danger to Lois as we had thought; however, I did save Mayson.”

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Flashback

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Clark departed the convenience store and headed for Mazik’s Jewelers where he sold some of his gems, after which he took a room at the Apollo.

He found Lois and Clark at the Planet and followed Lois at a distance as she left and went to the store to shop for dresses. Not perceiving any danger, he went back to the Planet and picked up Clark’s trail. He followed him to his apartment. Clark was trying on different suits, trying to see what would be best.

Putting two and two together, he figured that they were going out on a date. Lois hadn’t told him much about her early relationship with Clark and he was very interested in their relationship. He decided to follow and see just where this was going. Where it was going was an up-scale restaurant where Lois and Clark had a fancy meal and a lot of conversation, after which Clark took her home.

Alt Clark hovered just out of sight and followed them with his x-ray vision and tuned in on their conversation with his super hearing.

Local Clark walked Lois to her door. When they got to Lois’ door, she opened a single lock and pushed the door open. As she did she turned to Clark and with a sigh she said, “Well,” and stepped into the doorway.

Clark replied by saying, “Yeah.”

Lois turned to face him and looking up into his face, she said, “Okay, look, ummmmm, Clark, I had a really nice time.”

Clark said with a relieved chuckle, “So did I.”

Lois sighed and smiled very broadly. “No, I mean I had a really nice time. ... Probably one of the best times I’ve ever had. It wasn’t the funniest or the wildest ...”

Clark interrupted. “Don’t knock yourself out, Lois.”

Lois finished, “It just seemed to ... work.”

They just stood there looking at each other for several seconds before Lois heaved another sigh and said, “It was \*really\* nice ...” She got a look of panic on her face and in a rush, as if she couldn’t get it out fast enough, she said, “That’s why I can never see you again.” As she finished speaking she spun through the door and closed it in Clark’s face. As soon as she had the door closed she slumped back against it, sobbing, practically in tears, not tears of joy or even tears of hurt or pain, tears of fear and panic.

This was something totally beyond her experience. All the time she had dated Lex, she had never had a date like this one. It had been a perfect evening; well, maybe not perfect, but nearly so and it scared her. The feelings that were cascading over her left her stunned. What she was feeling was so different from what she had ever felt with Lex that it was like night and day. She had enjoyed the attention that Lex had lavished on her, but looking back on it, it had been too ... impersonal.

This single date with Clark had engendered emotions within her that she had never felt with Lex and didn’t think she ever could have felt with him. There was a comfort with Clark, a lack of pressure; she didn’t have to pretend to enjoy settings that she really didn’t care for. The restaurant that they had gone to this evening ... she felt certain that she would have felt



uncomfortable if she had been there with Lex, sure that she had to live up to some unspecified expectations. But with Clark, there was none of that and she had been comfortable just being herself. She never would have dared to ask for a taste of Lex's desert but she felt comfortable asking Clark for a taste. She didn't even object when he used his own fork to serve her. There was just something ...so ... Clark, about this date. She had been shocked when they had noticed that it was nearing midnight; the time had flown by. Now she was afraid that she would lose all of it, lose Clark. She didn't know what to do.

Clark was bewildered and simply stood there for several seconds before he said, "Lois?" in a hurt tone. He could hear her sobs on the other side of the door and couldn't come to a firm conclusion as to the cause. Had he done something? If he had, what was it?

She could hear the hurt in his tone and it tore at her. All the time she had been dating Lex she had never had an experience like this night. Lex had taken her places she could only imagine existed and that neither she nor Clark could ever, in their wildest dreams, afford — yet this evening they had gone to a very nice restaurant. She was a little afraid that the bill for this evening might have cost him his next month's rent. But this had been a very special evening. She was afraid that if she admitted how good a time she had had that it would change her relationship with Clark, maybe damage it irreparably. She was afraid she would lose him as her best friend and partner and she desperately didn't want that to happen, but how could this not change things? She desperately didn't want to ruin their relationship. She wanted things to remain the same between them but didn't know how they could after tonight. That was when she was unable to hold back the tears any longer. The tears finally came as she slid down the door until she was sitting on the floor with her arms wrapped around her legs and her face in her knees.

Clark just stood there at her door. He heard her clothing scraping along the door as she slid to the floor and then he heard her start crying. He didn't know what he could have done that could possibly have caused her to cry. That was the very last thing he ever wanted to do. He determined that if he had, in fact, been guilty of causing her to cry, it would be the last time. He never wanted to put her through that kind of pain again. He stood there for what seemed an interminable time searching his memory of the evening and coming up blank. After a time he decided that she needed some space ... and so did he ... to try to come to terms with just what had been said and what had happened. He was mystified because the two didn't correlate. From what she had said, he had been hoping that they would be kissing goodnight. Instead he had had the door slammed in his face. He knew that Lois was unpredictable and mercurial, but this was pushing the limits of credulity. This was going to require a lot of thought and tomorrow, after they had each had some time to come to grips with what had happened, a long discussion. He just didn't know how to start it. He turned and trudged down the hall away from her door.

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The next morning, Alt Superman flew in and hid in the supply closet just off the bullpen so that he could see what was happening. He heard a ding as the elevator arrived and as the doors opened he heard Lois' heartbeat, so he tuned in with his enhanced vision and watched as she dropped her bag at her desk and immediately headed for Perry's office. She appeared to be upset and didn't even bother to knock but just burst into his office.

As she walked up to Perry's desk with a very sad expression on her face and sad tone in her voice, she said, "I need a new partner."

Perry slammed down the pen he had been marking up copy with and said, "I knew it! One bad date and there goes my whole

newsroom." As he threw his arms out expansively to encompass the bullpen he stood. He continued, "Why don't you just shoot me now. Send me up to Elvis!"

Lois tried to interrupt. "Perry ..."

He was on a roll. "No, no, no," he cut her off with a sweeping downward motion of his arm like he was cutting her words. "Don't say it. You know I have ... stood on the sidelines ... hoping against hope that Mother Nature would smile on you two ..." He looked toward the heavens and made a sweeping gesture upward as if to call down what he was about to mention. "That the bluebird of happiness would come down, light on your shoulder ..." "Emphasizing his points, he was moving around and finally moved out from behind his desk as he continued. He brought his hand up and patted his shoulder to indicate just where he expected the blue bird of happiness to land, and said as he indicated the ground under her feet, "That four leaf clovers would spring up wherever you walked and all the time my gut is singing ..." Lois was growing increasingly frustrated that Perry wasn't allowing her to get a word in. Perry continued, "a different aria."

Lois tried to interrupt his rant. "Perry ...", but he cut her off. "Lois, anybody with half a hemisphere could see that you two are gasoline 'n fire, TNT 'n matches, two trains headed toward ..."

Lois finally shouted, "\*Perry\*!" He stopped and, startled, looked at her.

Lois calmly said, "Thank you. The problem is, we \*didn't\* have a bad date."

Perry was like a balloon that was slowly, or actually not so slowly, deflating. He said, "Oh." He got a very pensive expression on his face as he looked down in deep thought as he was taking her statements in.

Lois continued, "It was a really \*great\* date." Emotion started to creep into her voice and a look of panic overtook her features as she continued, "and now I'm \*completely\* panicked and I don't know what to do next."

Perry was winding down from his rant as he saw that he had really jumped to the wrong conclusion and the reality of what she was saying sank in. He pulled his hands apart where he had interlocked his fingers as he had been demonstrating two trains colliding and said, "Oh, oh, darlin', I ..." He could see that she was close to tears and he held out his arms inviting her into a hug as he said, "Come 'ere, Honey." As he folded her in his arms her tears began to flow. Perry was at a total loss for words.

Observing all of this, Alt Superman couldn't help but smile. He could see that things were going well between them and didn't see how he would need to help them. He would have to keep following them and see.

While Lois was in with Perry, Alt Superman heard the elevator ding and he checked to see just who was arriving. He saw local Clark exit the elevator and head for his desk. He saw him spot Lois' bag and look around for her, eventually spotting her in Perry's office. He settled into his chair to wait.

While he was waiting, a delivery boy dropped off a Desk Friend to him and asked where to leave the Shower Friend that was to go to Lois. Clark pointed out Lois' desk. The delivery boy dropped off the device and left.

Alt Superman kept watching. After Lois had had a chance to settle down, she left Perry's office. Clark was sitting at his desk playing with a pair of scissors from his Desk Friend and as she walked by he tried to talk to her. "Lois ..." She ignored him and walked right past him to get to her desk. Clark said, "That came for you while you were in there with Perry."

She replied, somewhat distractedly, "Uh, thanks." She started to examine the Shower Friend that was propped up on a desk chair next to her desk. She grabbed the card, opened and read it. "I thought I'd save you the trouble of ordering. Enjoy, Lucky Leon" She leaned down and picked up the Shower Friend. Clark stood and started walking over to her as he said, "Lois, about last

night ...”

Lois changed the subject. “These things are kind of attractive, in, in a hideous sort of way.”

Clark continued, “I’m a bit confused ...”

Lois again tried to change the subject. “Oh, look, yours has a stapler and a radio ... pencil sharpener, that’s pretty convenient.”

Clark continued, “Did I ... do something to offend you ...”

He continued as she talked over him, “Because if I did, I apologize.”

Lois continued trying to deflect. “Oh my goodness, imitation wood paneling, ha he hu, must be the deluxe model.”

Clark, still trying to discuss the issue, had stepped closer to her as he said, “Lois, no one is asking for a lifetime commitment or anything like that, so there’s no pressure here at all.” As he was finishing she was talking over him again.

Lois continued, “Oh look, batteries \*are\* included.”

Bowing to the inevitable, he changed tack and reaching down, picked up his Desk Friend and as he was picking it up said, “Here, you want to trade?”

As he came back up facing her she said, “No, no, no, no, I love mine.”

He took the Shower Friend and handed her the Desk Friend as he said, “Please believe me, I’ve been looking for something like this for a long time.” He finally succeeded in exchanging items with her.

Lois’ face fell into a very sad expression as she said, “Ohhhh, Clark, about last night ...”

Trying to encourage her to continue he said, “Yeah?”

Lois had a pleading expression as she continued, “I just want to say that ...”

Suddenly Mayson Drake, who had been crossing the bullpen floor, stopped and shouted, “Stop the presses!” and there was suddenly quiet all around. She laughed quietly to herself as she walked over toward Lois and Clark. She said, “I’ve always wanted to say that in the newsroom.”

Lois, with an insulted expression, said, “Nobody ever says that, you know. That’s just on television.”

Lois stepped around her and Mayson sort of followed her with her eyes as she said, “Sure, but it felt good.”

Lois set the Desk Friend on her desk and turned to Mayson to ask, “So, what’s the deal with Jimmy?”

Mayson, serious now, crossed her arms as she replied, “Well, the judge wants to revoke bail and bring him in. He thinks he’s a flight risk, after his car escapade.”

Clark leaped to Jimmy’s defense, coming over closer to Mayson as he said, “That was an accident.”

Mayson, addressing Clark, said, “I got him twenty-four hours more, but that’s it. Meanwhile, I’ve been doing some digging. I called a friend of mine in D. C.; he’s going to call me back as soon as he finishes a background check on Borjaes and Lucky Leon.”

Lois, with a skeptical look, asked, “And you came all the way down here to tell us that in person?”

Mayson, nervous now, replied, “Actually, I came to ask Clark to lunch. One of my New Year’s resolutions is to be more decisive. Plus, it’s much harder to reject somebody in person.”

Alt Clark could see that this Mayson was just as attracted to Clark as his Mayson was to him, once she got over the vigilante thing. He wanted to help Clark out, but how to do it was the question. He would have to continue to follow and maybe something would come up.

“Clark replied, “That’s nice, Mayson, but ...”

Lois interrupted, “Go! I’ll hold down the fort,” as she settled into her desk chair.

Clark turned to her and appealed, “But Lois ...”

Lois replied, “No, it’s okay. If anything breaks, I’ll call you. Have a good time.”

Mayson said, “Hey, I told my office that I’d either be here or at Mars Café so if they call will you ...”

Lois interrupted again. “Absolutely.”

Mayson smiled and reached for Clark’s arm and he didn’t have a very happy expression as she started to drag him away. After only a step she stopped and turned to Lois and said, “By the way, Borjaes was poisoned. Somebody killed him with synthetic curare.”

With a dumbfounded expression Lois said, “What???”

Mayson just finger waved and dragged Clark away, not noticing Clark’s unhappy expression.

Lois watched them go, but even though she had been the one to tell him to go, she wasn’t happy that he was actually going and as they left she looked down with a very sad expression on her face.

Alt Clark’s heart was practically breaking as he watched this. Just then, he saw someone headed to the supply closet so he made his exit through the window.

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He spotted Clark and Mayson as they exited the building. Staying out of sight, he followed them to a café and watched as they ordered.

After they had ordered and while they were waiting for their meal to arrive Mayson started the conversation. “Clark, ...”

Clark replied, “Yes?”

Encouraged by this, Mayson resumed, “This isn’t easy, but I’m sure it’s obvious from the way I’ve been throwing myself at you that I have feelings for you.”

The waitress asked, “Is everything alright?”

Mayson waved her away.

After she went away, Mayson resumed, “This is when you’re supposed to say, I have feelings for you too, Mayson.”

Clark looked like he was trapped in a Kryptonite cage and was somewhat panicked. He couldn’t lie to Mayson, but he didn’t want to hurt her feelings unnecessarily either, so he said, “Well, I do.”

Mayson’s countenance fell at this response and she said, sarcastically, “That was enthusiastic.”

Clark wanted to let her down easy so he said, “Mayson, I care about you and I think about you, a lot ...”

She shot back a question. “Then what’s the problem?”

Clark sighed, and gestured with his hands as if to say that he was at a loss for words. He asked himself, “How do I say this?”

Mayson said, “Tell me. Clark, I’m a lawyer. I know you’re hiding something, something that’s keeping us apart. What is it? I can handle it.”

With another sigh, he replied, “Mayson, it’s not that easy.”

Mayson could see her hopes crumbling and she said, “If it’s Lois, just say it.”

Clark, still wanting to spare her feelings said, “Mayson, I care for you ... and I care for Lois.”

Mayson sat back in her chair as she took this in. She started to address him. “Clark, I ...” but at this point she was interrupted by his cell phone ringing.

More than a little chagrined, he said, “I’m sorry.” And reached for his phone and answered, “Clark Kent. What? Lois, are you sure? Alright, I’ll see if I can contact Superman right away.” He closed the phone and turned to Mayson, saying, “Mayson, I’m really sorry, I have to go.” He got up and ran.

As he did so Alt Superman could hear what local Clark couldn’t. Mayson said, almost under her breath, “I love you.”

Alt Superman didn’t know where local Clark was off to but he decided to continue to follow Mayson. After returning to her office to check on some paperwork, she eventually wound up back at the Daily Planet. He flew into the supply closet again and started to observe. They had arrived just before a televised news conference announcing that Superman had turned over a load of

atomic warheads to terrorists.

Mayson was in the newsroom again and Clark and Lois were standing right behind her as they heard the announcement and they were blown away by it.

Perry said, "Oh, boy, I just never thought I'd see the day when Superman turned to crime."

Mayson turned to them and smugly said, "I've said all along that he was a menace, now he's proved it."

Clark interrupted, "He's been tricked, Chief, I'm positive."

Lois jumped in. "Superman would never help terrorists."

Perry was standing there with his arms crossed as he said, "Yeah, well then, why isn't he out there try'n to make good?"

Mayson smugly offered, "Because he's a criminal, that's why."

Clark said, "You know, I just remembered something really important I have to do. Excuse me."

Perry brought him up short by asking, "More important than a bunch of terrorists blowing us all from here to Elvis and back? Now you get your butt over there in your chair and you start typing." He looked at Lois and said, "You too. I want everything you've got on this mess and I want it in a half an hour."

As he stalked away, Lois said, "Right, Chief."

They started to head for their desks. Mayson stopped Clark. "Clark, um, I guess I picked a bad time to finish our conversation, but you still owe me for lunch."

She turned to Lois and sarcastically said, "Um, and Lois, thanks for taking that message for me," just before she turned and walked away.

Lois said, "You know, the big news is going to be, who finds those nuclear warheads."

Clark said, "Believe me, I'd love to solve this but even Superman wouldn't know where to look."

Just at this point Alt Superman saw someone headed to the supply closet, so he had to make his exit again. He decided to find Mayson and follow her again. From what he had seen and heard he knew that this Mayson was very much like his Mayson, that is, before she really got to know him. She headed back to her office and settled in so he decided to go back and follow local Clark.

## Chapter 12 — The Second Mission — Saving Mayson

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 025 x Gamma 120 x Tau 086

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By the time Alt Clark got there, though, they had left the building. He knew from their previous conversation that they were probably out looking for the warhead shipment. Not knowing where to look, he started canvassing the outskirts of Metropolis.

Just as he was passing a somewhat run-down factory building north of town, he heard an electronic timer start and he checked with his super vision. He saw a warhead with an active timer, the terrorists fleeing, and Lois, Jimmy and local Clark chained up to a piece of equipment.

He swooped in and broke the chain that had them bound. As he landed, local Clark's eyes almost bugged out of his head. He was so shocked he almost gave everything away as he stuttered, "Wh, wh, who, who are you?"

Alt Superman asked, "Did they hit you in the head, Clark? Don't you recognize Superman?" He couldn't resist a small smile and a wink at local Clark.

Lois shouted, "Enough chit chat! There's a bomb about to explode!"

Alt Superman said, "Right. You all need to clear the area."

Lois ran out the doors and headed for her car. As soon as Lois' back was turned, Local Clark turned to Alt Superman and

confronted him. "Just who are you? What are you doing here?"

Without replying, Alt Superman ran over to the bomb and examined it. He said, "I'm here to protect you and Lois. Can we discuss this later?"

Lois was just about to reach her Jeep when she looked around and realized that Clark wasn't with her, so she turned and shouted, "Clark?!?!?!!" She ran back into the factory in time to see Superman examining the warhead with Clark standing next to him.

As she ran up to him, Superman asked, "Lois, what are you doing here?"

She answered, "I couldn't find Clark. I thought he was right behind me but when I turned around he wasn't there. I just had to find him and when I do find him, he's in here with you."

Superman said, "You have to get out, now!"

She looked at Clark before she asked Superman, "Can't you stop it?"

He answered, "I tried, but it has a lead-shielded backup timer. If I can't read it I can't stop it."

Lois looked at the timer and with desperation in her voice, said, "Twelve seconds!"

Alt Superman reached over, picked up the device and said, "Looks like it's time for a field goal."

Lois had a worried and fearful expression as she watched him place the warhead on the floor and back up a couple of paces before he kicked the warhead like a place kicker trying for a field goal.

Clark watched as the warhead passed between a couple of smoke stacks. He shifted his attention back to Lois and Superman and started to chuckle as Lois threw her hands up in the field goal sign as she shouted, "It's up! It's good!" Then she started to chuckle.

Clark turned toward her and she became self-conscious about her exuberance and pulled her hands down. She had recently been disclaiming about the use of sports metaphors and here she was using one herself.

Superman said, "Excuse me a minute, Lois, I'll be right back." He flew off.

Lois started looking around and shouting, "Jimmy!!! Now where did he get to?" Just then Superman returned with Lucky Leon and his Inter-Gang contact. Superman bound them and turned them over to Lois and Clark to give to the authorities.

Seeing that things were under control, Alt Superman said, "I guess you can handle things from here. I'll see you around." Swooshing off with an extra flourish of his cape for Lois' benefit, he returned to the Planet and staked himself out in the supply room again. After a time Lois, Clark and Jimmy returned.

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They explained to Perry just how they had found the perps and the warheads and brought about the round-up of all involved. When they finished Perry put an arm around Jimmy's shoulder and led him toward his office while telling another Elvis anecdote. At his office door he turned and said, "Hey, you two, Why don't ya get outta here. Jimmy and I'll put the paper to bed."

Clark replied, "Thanks, Chief. We promised Mayson Drake we'd stop by her office and give her our statements as soon as we could. We're already late."

Standing in the door to his office with his hands in his pockets, Perry said, "Alright, beat it, then," and turned to walk into his office.

Lois slung her bag over her shoulder and leaned over to turn off her desk lamp. As she was standing up, she sighed and said, "Ahhh. One thing I don't understand is how Lucky Leon was able to kill Borjaes." She picked up her Desk Friend as she continued, "Or even how he knew the clues he was feeding us were working." She lifted the Desk Friend and tried to hand it to

Clark as she said, “Here, I want you to have this back.”

Clark looked down at it and put up his hands in a defensive gesture as he said, “No, wait, we made a fair trade!”

They argued back and forth for a couple of seconds and the Desk Friend fell to the floor and broke open. When it did, they discovered a digital uplink and a remote control camera. Clark, with a not quite ‘I told you so’ look, said, “Let’s just say it’s a good thing you didn’t keep the Shower Friend.”

Lois gave him a look that said, ‘You think you’re smart’ but then exactly what the implications of his statement were hit her and she became self-conscious, pulling her jacket closed as Clark chuckled.

They left the Planet together and were walking toward the building that housed the DA’s office at a slow stroll as they talked.

Clark said, “Lois, I don’t really know ... exactly how to say this, ... but ... Why did you come back for me tonight ... to the factory? I mean, you were running back into an atomic explosion.”

Lois sighed and said, “I know. It doesn’t make too much sense, does it?” She thought for a few seconds before answering, “I guess I just couldn’t leave you there.”

Making an abrupt change in topic, Clark pointed out, “You slammed the door in my face last night.”

Lois sighed again and stopped walking as she turned to face him. She had a very sober expression on her face as she said, “That was ... a mistake.”

Clark, looking deep into her eyes, gently said, “Don’t let it happen again.”

As he finished, she realized that she was being forgiven and released a relieved sigh and started to smile. After a few seconds of enjoying being forgiven by him, she said, “I guess we’ll ... uh ... just ... have to see how things go. Won’t we?”

Clark very softly said, “Fortunately, there’re no doors here tonight.”

Lois, with a look of fear mixed with hope, softly replied, “Fortunately,” as they both slowly moved toward each other and their lips met in a gentle kiss which lasted only a short time.

When they pulled apart, both realized that something wonderful had just happened and both leaned back in and started kissing again. This time his hands came up and cupped the sides of her face as the kiss deepened.

Meanwhile, at city hall, Mayson Drake was leaving the building. Alt Clark had seen her off and on during this case as she had handled it, to a certain extent interceding on Jimmy’s behalf. Alt Clark was still following and watching Lois and Clark, but hearing Mayson’s voice, he was drawn to her since he had been intimately involved with her in another universe. Besides, he felt that Lois and Clark needed their privacy. He found that she actually was very close.

He heard her on her cell phone saying, “If Clark and Lois show up, tell them that I got tired of waiting. They’re not the only case I’m working on.”

He saw her insert her key into her driver’s door and unlock it. As she did, he heard an electronic beep that only his superhearing would have heard. He knew that it had to be more than coincidence, so he put on a burst of speed and landed between her and her car. He scooped her up and flew straight up until he felt that they were in the clear and came to a hover.

Local Clark had heard the same sound and broke away from the kiss. Lois was in a dreamy state, head tilted slightly back, eyes closed, lips slightly parted, and remained that way for several seconds before the realization that Clark was no longer there registered.

Local Clark ran up, but the car exploded in his face and, not realizing that Mayson was not in the car, he was distraught. After the smoke cleared somewhat he could see that the car was

untenanted and he started looking around; however, he neglected to look up.

It had happened so suddenly that Mayson was stunned for a few seconds. When she realized just what had happened, she started to struggle and shout, “Just what the hell do you think you’re doing?!?!?”

Trying to explain, Alt Superman said, “I heard something.” Suddenly her car exploded.

She was shocked to silence. Alt Superman slowly descended and landed next to the remains of the car just a few seconds after local Clark realized that the car was empty.

Local Clark was stunned to again see the other Superman and stuttered, “You, again!”

Alt Superman gave him a cautioning look and said, “Yes, it’s me, Clark, I realize that you don’t normally see me so much in a single day, but it was bound to happen sooner or later. Is there a problem?”

Local Clark, regaining some of his equilibrium, said, “Uh, no, I guess not. Uh, how did you happen to be here?” He turned to Mayson. “Mayson, are you okay?”

Still feeling somewhat disoriented by what had happened, Mayson was slow to recover, but finally responded, “Yeah, Clark, I’m okay.” The reluctance was evident in her voice as she finished, “Thanks to Superman, here. He got me away from my car, just before it exploded.”

Lois came running up at this point. She looked at Clark and asked, “What happened? I saw the explosion! Why did you run away like that?”

Local Clark tore his eyes away from Superman and looked at Lois before he said, “I, uh ...”

Superman spoke up. “I think that Clark might have heard a noise the same way I did and he wanted to help out. Clark’s like that, but of course you already know that.”

Whether it was out of exuberance at their new-found relationship or the fact that Mayson was there, she couldn’t be sure when she thought about it afterwards, but Lois put her arm possessively around Clark’s waist and said, “Yeah, I know. He’s always helping me, whether I want him to or not.”

The move wasn’t wasted on Mayson. She could see that Lois was staking her claim and that if Mayson really wanted Clark, she was going to have to fight for him. Thinking about Clark’s response at lunch, though, even though her feelings ran very deep for Clark she didn’t know if she really had a snowball’s chance of winning. In this kind of a contest the prize really has to want to be won and she wasn’t sure that Clark did.

Superman said, “Clark, since you are obviously occupied, I’ll see to it that Ms. Drake makes it home okay.”

Local Clark, still somewhat at a loss for words, said, “Yeah, okay. I’ll see you later then?”

Superman said firmly, “Count on it.”

Local Clark turned to Mayson and said, “We’ll stop by tomorrow and give our statements, okay?”

Mayson, somewhat distractedly, replied, “That will be fine. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

With a little urging from Lois, local Clark turned and they walked away, but he did glance over his shoulder a few times. The last time, he saw a patrolman arrive to take their statements before Superman picked up Mayson and took to the air.

Local Clark had been in a thoughtful mood ever since meeting the other Superman. Lois had mistaken his thoughtfulness as preoccupation about their blossoming relationship. When they got to her door, she opened her lock and said, “Well, where were we? Oh, I know!” She took a step closer to Clark and slid her hands up his chest and around his neck, tangling her fingers in his hair. Slowly she brought her face closer and slowly Clark moved to meet her. Their lips met in a soft caress. Slowly the kiss deepened as they both parted their lips and

their tongues met in a gentle dance.

After several minutes, breathlessly, Lois broke the kiss and asked, “Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee or something?”

Clark replied in a throaty whisper, “Or something.”

Lois, with a very big smile, took his hand and pulled him into her apartment. After closing the door she led him to her couch and after he was sitting she sat on his lap. She put her arms around his neck again and he wrapped her up in his arms and they started kissing some more. Before too long they were lying side by side on the couch.

After a while, when they weren’t kissing Lois was looking deep into his dark brown eyes and she asked, “What took us so long? This just seems so right. We’ve wasted a lot of time because I was afraid to make the commitment. When I went to see Perry today, he really didn’t give me any advice, I just listened while he vented, but he made me realize what a fool I was being. We had a terrific date and we’re still best friends and nothing is going to change that. I guess I really realized how much you meant to me when I thought you were going to die in an atomic explosion and I would be losing you. I didn’t want that. I just couldn’t bear to leave you. That’s why I came back.”

Clark replied to this with a chuckle, “I’m just glad you decided not to shut the door in my face again. Lois, I do want us to have a meaningful relationship. Every time we are together doesn’t have to be a date. If we’re working on something and have a pizza together, that’s not a date; it’s a working dinner, okay? But, I do want us to date. I want that very much.” He started choking up as he continued, “I don’t want to lose you. When you said that last night and closed the door in my face, I thought my world had ended. I couldn’t bear the thought of not being with you.”

Lois reached out with her hand and started caressing the side of his face as she said, “I think I’ve settled my fears now. I want to move this relationship ahead.” She moved in for another kiss.

It was some time later that Clark returned to his apartment.

### Chapter 13 — The Second Mission — Resurrection

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 025 x Gamma 120 x Tau 086

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Alt Superman took a chance that this Mayson lived at the same address as his Mayson and landed in front of her building. He escorted her to her door and she asked, “Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee, or something?” Meanwhile she was wondering just how he knew where she lived.

Alt Superman mistook her preoccupation with the revelation about Lois and Clark and Superman’s knowledge of her. She wanted to find out more.

He thought that she was still suffering from reaction to what had happened and was in a light state of shock like post traumatic stress syndrome so he replied, “I think I’d like that.”

She led the way in to her apartment, threw her briefcase on the floor next to a table just inside the door and indicating the couch, said, “Have a seat, it’ll be just a couple of minutes.”

He took all of this to be a coping mechanism and gave her the time she needed by sitting on the couch. He looked around at the room. It was somewhat spartan with few decorations or feminine touches. He took this in and analyzed it. The logical assumption was that as a female lawyer, a profession that was still dominated by men, she felt that she needed to present a totally professional front to any visitors. He had seen the same thing with his Mayson; however, he knew that if this Mayson was like his that if he were to enter her bedroom he would find it to be very feminine with lots of lace and frills. He had spent a good deal of time in her apartment, some of it in her bedroom cuddling on her

bed.

When she came back into the living room she had removed her jacket, revealing a sleeveless, low-cut, cream-colored blouse that complimented her blond hair. He couldn’t help but stare. He had seen his Mayson in the same outfit any number of times. It had been one of her favorite work outfits. With the jacket it had that professional, no-nonsense air but under the jacket was the very feminine woman that actually craved the attention of a man.

Carrying in the coffee on a tray she set it on the coffee table. She handed him a cup and, picking up hers, they started preparing it the way they each preferred. Seizing the initiative, she asked, “Why did you save me tonight? You have to know that I didn’t like you or what you stand for.”

“Ms. Drake, just what do you think I stand for?”

“I have to admit that earlier today, I thought you had really shown your true colors and were a criminal, but then you brought the real criminals in and were cleared. I guess I might just have been wrong about you all along, but you’re still a vigilante. You don’t obey the law. You act like you are a law unto yourself.”

He replied, “Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong. The main thing I stand for \*is\* law and order. I do not disobey the law, even when it isn’t convenient or right. If you recall, back when they thought that I was causing the heat-wave and ordered me to stop using my super powers or leave town, I was in the process of leaving when the true culprit was discovered and it was found to all be a hoax to try and get rid of me. If I stop a mugging or bank robbery, I always turn the perps over the MPD.” Alt Clark was happy to be able to relate this incident since it hadn’t happened to him. Here were certain similarities between the universes, but there was a distinct difference between those that followed his type and those that followed the Prime pattern. Fortunately in his missions he had been given various anecdotes about their histories while he had been with them.

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

Clark was marveling at the similarities between this conversation and one he had had with his Mayson and he set his coffee down before saying, “That would actually limit me in what I could do. There are so many things that I do that are not associated with law enforcement that limiting myself to police work would make me feel like I was neglecting the other aspects of what I see as my part-time job.” He started ticking off items on his fingers as he started enumerating them. “Rescuing people from burning structures, from collapsing buildings, from mud slides, from hurricanes and tornados ...oh, and exploding cars; I could go on and on.” He threw his arms out as if to encompass the world. “There is also the fact that if I became a member of the force I could be perceived as a representative of the U. S. whenever I assist in international incidents. In that respect I must remain neutral, not representing any single country but mankind in general.”

This had been a new revelation to Mayson and she said in a somewhat awed tone, “I guess I can see that. Wow, all of those activities, all those rescues, it must actually make you feel good when you save so many lives. I hope I don’t make you regret that you saved me a little while ago.”

“I could never regret saving you. Believe it or not, you are special to me.” He could see the startled expression she got from this statement and continued, “It is tremendously rewarding in and of itself to save lives. The satisfaction in knowing that as a result of my actions this individual will live to see another day; it’s extremely gratifying.”

Mayson had been startled by his statement. She wondered, “How could I be special to \*him\*? I never really met him before tonight. We haven’t interacted at all. Where could this be going?” After having had another sip of her coffee, she set the cup down.

She had been thinking about all of the reports of his activities. She seemed to recall some reports of dead bodies being recovered. Mayson got a somewhat concerned expression as she asked, “But ... you don’t \*always\* get there in time, \*do\* you? I mean ... you can’t \*always\* get there before someone has died; \*do\* you?”

A very sad look came over his face as he answered, “No, Ms. Drake, no ... I don’t. No matter \*how\* much I try sometimes I’m just not there soon enough ... or I’m not \*fast\* enough to get to everyone in time. Sometimes there are just too \*many\*. No matter how \*hard\* I try ... sometimes it just isn’t enough.” What she didn’t know was that this particular question struck him the hardest of all. It threw him back in memory to the loss of his parents and also, more recently, \*his\* Lois.

Mayson could see the unshed tears well up in his eyes and, moved by his apparent sadness, reached out and placed her hand on his arm and said, “Nobody’s perfect. You expect too much of yourself if you expect to rescue \*everyone\* \*every\* time. You need to cut yourself some slack. You can only do so much and whatever you \*can\* do has to be enough. Look at it this way, if you \*hadn’t\* been there \*at all\*, how many of those you did save \*would\* have died? I have to admit that you do a lot of good. I’ve been more than a little down on you because of your apparent vigilantism, but I think I’m starting to see things more from \*your\* point of view now. You do a tremendous lot of good and you get very little recognition for the good that you do. I wish that there were something I could do for you. You are obviously a very caring person. I can see that from what you’ve said. I can see that it tears you up when someone \*dies\* because of your self-perceived failings. Do you have \*anyone\* that you can talk to? You know, when things don’t go quite right. Do you have any close friends ... a girlfriend, perhaps?”

Mayson could see the sadness in his expression as he replied, “No, Ms. Drake, I don’t. Let’s look at this realistically; if I were to become involved with a woman, she would become susceptible to kidnap and injury were she known to be associated with me.”

Seeing a possible flaw in his reasoning, Mayson asked, “What about Lois Lane? People clearly associate her with you.”

“That is starting to happen less and less as time goes on. There will still be a certain amount of association since she does so many stories about my activities, but the association is professional and not personal.”

These revelations had given Mayson new insight into this man she was with. She took another sip of her coffee while she thought. Now she was seeing him as less a vigilante and more as a selfless, caring man who felt a compulsion to help in any way that he could and considering just who he was and what he could do, that was a lot.

Alt Superman brought the conversation around to the incident tonight. “Ms. Drake, who would want to kill you? What are you working on?”

She considered for a few seconds before answering, “First, please call me Mayson. Second, it probably was not related to the case against Jimmy Olsen and if it wasn’t, then it has to be related to Resurrection.”

Superman stopped her there and asked, “Resurrection ... like in the Bible?”

“Sort of; we got a line on a drug that could be used to simulate death. A sample of the drug ‘came in over the transom’, if you know what I mean. I had just called the DEA about it. They’re supposed to be sending an agent over to pick it up for analysis. I’ve had it analyzed by STAR Labs but it needs to go through the proper channels. Let’s see, I’ve got his name here, somewhere.” She started rummaging around in her bag and came up with a sticky-note with a name and number on it. “Yeah, here it is, Dan Scardino. I’m supposed to meet him tomorrow. Oh my

God, I just remembered, the drug sample, I have it hidden in my car! Superman, can you get it for me?”

“Sure, just tell me where to look.”

“In the driver’s door, the sill, pull that up, it’s only held by a couple of screws; in the well are a couple of capsules in a sealed metal tube.”

“Wait right here, I’ll be right back.” He walked over to the door and exited. Fifteen seconds later there was a knock at the door.

Mayson went over and peeked out the security lens and seeing Superman, opened the door. He walked in and handed the metal tube to Mayson and said, “Here’s what I found.”

Heaving a relieved sigh, she said, “That’s it.” She picked up her case again and placed it inside.

Superman said, “Since your car has been destroyed, how about I give you a lift to work tomorrow?”

Coily she said, “You really don’t have to do that ... could you?”

He chuckled and asked, “What time do you want your taxi to pick you up in the morning?”

“Well, I have to be in the office at nine.”

“Okay, I can pick you up at 8:59.”

With a hopeful tone in her voice, she asked, “Would you like a cup of coffee ... before you take me to work, I mean.”

Again, he chuckled. “Okay, 8:45.”

She asked, “Two sugars and milk, right?”

“Very observant! I guess I should have expected nothing less. Yes, two sugars and milk. Mayson, I’ve enjoyed our talk.”

Coily again, she replied, “I have too. Well, I guess I’ll see you in the morning, then.”

With a sincere expression, he said, “Bright and early; good night, Mayson.”

“Good night, Superman.”

Superman walked out and paused to listen as she locked her locks. As soon as he was satisfied that she was secure, he took to the air and headed for 344 Clinton Ave. Landing on the balcony, he knocked on the French doors. Hearing local Clark say, “Come in,” he entered and spun out of the Suit as he walked through the bedroom into the living room.

Local Clark was sitting on his sofa when Alt Clark walked in. Alt Clark moved over and sat in the easy chair across from Local Clark and said, “I’m sure you have a million questions. Why not let me explain and then if you still have questions I’ll answer them, if I can.” At local Clark’s nod he started.

“Have you ever met H. G. Wells?”

Local Clark said, “No. The name sounds a little familiar.” He snapped his fingers as he figured it out and asked, “Wait, wasn’t there an author by that name?”

“Yeah, He was an author, but he was actually more than that. If you had met him, you’d remember. Anyhow, I have this friend, Herb Wells, and he has the means of traveling through time and across the dimensional boundaries. I am actually from another dimension, or as we chose to call them, universe. In my universe I am you.” Alt Clark proceeded to fill him in on his story about Lois and the missions he was going on.

As he was finishing up, he addressed the topic of Mayson. “In my universe I had a relationship with \*my\* Mayson. Your Mayson is very much like mine. The problem is that Mayson is not the woman for you. Lois is.”

Local Clark replied, “I guess I’ve known that all along. I can’t believe that Lois was throwing me at her. I think we settled that tonight, though.”

Using a very sympathetic tone, Alt Clark replied, “I was at the Planet and saw that, but trust me, Lois is the one for you. She’s was a little scared about making that commitment, but that will pass.”

Local Clark interrupted, “I think it already has. We stabilized

our relationship tonight. We are going to move forward with it.”

Alt Clark said, “That’s good news. Here’s what I’ll do to help out. I’ll keep Mayson busy. In fact, I have an idea for something to try that may solve your problem, permanently.”

With a worried look and tone, local Clark asked, “Permanently? Just what are you planning?”

With a laugh at his concern, he said, “Nothing like what I suspect you are imagining. I am going to try to get her interested in someone else so that she’ll leave you alone. In a way, I’ve complicated matters tonight. You see, in most of the other universes, she died in that car bombing. I couldn’t help it; I just had to save her, because she’s so like my Mayson. Unfortunately, I can’t step in and start a relationship with her because I’ll be leaving in a few weeks. I’m thinking I can solve two problems for you at the same time. You see, she is supposed to meet a DEA agent tomorrow. In other universes Mayson hasn’t been around and he has hit on Lois like Mayson was hitting on you. I’m thinking that I’ll see if I can throw them together. If they start to date she won’t be after you and he won’t be after Lois. What do you think, worth a try?”

Local Clark had a somewhat relieved expression as he said, “Thanks, you don’t know how much this means to me. I like Mayson, really, I like her a lot, but like you said, Lois is the woman for me. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you saving Mayson.”

“I know. Let me tell you a short story. In my universe, my Lois was killed on the Congo investigation so when I started working at the Planet I was on the City Desk without a partner. Mayson really had an attitude about me being a vigilante, but we were thrown together on an investigation and she got to know me personally and we had a relationship. We never consummated it, but we did come close. I just couldn’t let anything happen to this Mayson, for her sake. She’s still special to me.”

Local Clark said, “I can see that and I’m glad you saved her. I hope your plan works. The way Mayson is pursuing a relationship with me I’m afraid that I’d really be hurting her feelings eventually.”

Alt Clark said, “I can only hope that it works. I’ll do everything I can to get them together. Okay, I’m gonna get out of here. Why don’t we do this; we can’t both be active at the same time and my being here can only help you with your secret identity. Why don’t you take a break from being Superman, for a few days anyhow, and let me handle things.” He continued with a wink, “That way you won’t be running out on Lois all the time. If you need me, I’m at the Apollo under the name of Charlie King.”

With a wistful tone in his voice, local Clark said, “Take a break from being Superman. Be just plain old ‘normal’ Clark Kent for a few days. Wow! Thanks! An opportunity like this doesn’t come along every day. I appreciate the offer and I’ll take you up on it.”

Alt Clark said, “I’ll get out of here now and do a patrol. I have an appointment to pick up Mayson at 8:45 for coffee and to fly her to work. I’ll do what I can to be there when Scardino shows up. I’ll check with you tomorrow.” He chuckled as he said, “Enjoy having some ‘normal’ time.”

“I will, but what if Lois winds up in a situation?”

Suddenly, local Clark ‘heard’ something, /Call me./ He was startled and asked, “How did you do that? Was it ventriloquism?”

Clark chuckled as he said, “In one of the other universes there was a group of Kryptonians that had escaped the destruction of the planet. The Clark of that world found out that they could communicate telepathically.” He stopped speaking and continued telepathically, /All you need to do is think about me and what you want to say. Try it./

Local Clark thought, /Is this how it’s done?/

Alt Clark thought back, /You’ve got it. If you are with Lois and she gets herself, and you, into a situation that you need help

with, just call me./ With a wave Alt Clark left to do the patrol.

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The next morning at 8:45 sharp, Mayson heard a knock on her door. Mayson had just stepped out of the shower and had a towel wrapped around her that only came down to a little above mid-thigh. She was drying her hair, with another towel and when she lifted her hands to use the towel to dry her hair, where the other towel overlapped on the left gaped open to reveal the rest of her leg and left side to above the waist. She checked through the peephole and seeing Superman, opened the door. Brightly, she said, “Good morning!”

Noting her attire and looking her up and down, Alt Clark couldn’t help flashing back in his memory to the time, just before he left on his original mission to find Lois in the Congo, when he and Mayson had shared the shower. He was flushed from the memory and somewhat choked up as he said, “Good morning, Mayson. I hope I’m not too early.”

Mayson, for her part, noted his scrutiny and his blushing. Even though she didn’t know the source, she was inwardly pleased that he was paying her the attention. She said, “No, you’re fine. It’ll only take me a couple of minutes to finish up. Have a seat,” as she padded barefoot to her bedroom.

Superman watched her walk away and as he watched her legs, the memory of Mayson in his oxford shirt walking to the table, dinner plates in hand, flashed through his mind. She was barely through the bedroom door and not quite out of sight when she released the body towel and he had a view of her back and derriere before she passed from view. Trying to submerge these memories in activity, he went into the kitchen and got out the fixings for the coffee and put it on to drip.

Just as it was finishing, Mayson came out, completely dressed. She saw that the coffee was finishing up and said, “Well, you seem to know your way around my kitchen. I guess you can see where everything is with your x-ray vision. What are you doing tonight? I was planning to make lasagna.”

He realized that he had almost made a mistake. His familiarity with Mayson’s kitchen from being in it so much had almost revealed too much. Fortunately, she had provided a cover for his knowledge. Somehow he wasn’t surprised at this invitation. He said, “Hmmm, what am I doing tonight? I’d say it looks like I’m having lasagna with a beautiful woman. What time?”

She blushed prettily at this compliment and as she started fixing her coffee she suggested, “How’s seven thirty?”

“I’ll try. You have to understand, if I get a call ...”

She almost tripped over her own words to get her reply out. “Oh, I understand completely! I wouldn’t want anyone to be hurt or even die because you were with me.” She took a sip of her coffee.

“Well, as long as I’m not called away, I’ll be here.” He held out his coffee cup as if in a toast and then took a sip before asking, “What do you think the purpose of this drug is?” He had been told the story about Resurrection by another Clark but he needed to find out how much she knew before he could drop any hints.

She said, “It seems that it is a barbiturate that can induce a temporary state of suspended animation which would mimic death. I can’t think of any good use for it.”

Superman asked, “Why would someone want to simulate death? Perhaps a magician in a performance or an escape artist?” he inquired.

Thinking about what he had just said, Mayson snapped her fingers and blurted out, “Escape artist! What if. No ... it couldn’t be. But maybe it could be. I have to check ... There have been a string of deaths by ‘natural causes’ at the Metropolis Penitentiary recently. What if those convicts weren’t really dead? I’ve \*got\* to check on this! Thanks, Superman! I could kiss you!” Suiting

her actions to her words, she threw her arms around his neck and did just that. Her intent was a kiss of gratitude, of thanks, but it turned into something more.

Clark was taken by surprise but when she was kissing him, it just felt so familiar that he went with it and Mayson was breathless when they broke from the kiss.

She said, “Wow!” and gave him a very appraising look. She had felt him accept and then deepen the kiss in a way that she really liked, almost as if he knew just how she liked to kiss, almost as if he knew her intimately. The familiarity he showed shocked her.

There was a mystified expression on her face as she stood there looking at him.

He said, “I’m sorry, Mayson. I shouldn’t have done that, taken such liberty.”

She countered, “No, don’t apologize! I ... enjoyed it, \*very\* much.” She gave him another very close appraisal.

Seeing the way she was looking at him, he decided that he needed to distract her somehow. He pointedly looked at her clock and said, “I think we need to go.”

She snapped out of her reverie and said, “Oh, yeah, right, let’s go.”

He cleaned up the coffee maker and cups at superspeed and then offered his arm to Mayson. When he had finished, she said, “You’d be really handy around the house.” She walked over, picked up her bag and then stuck her arm through his as they exited the apartment. Once on the front stoop, he scooped her up and took to the air. She had an expression like a kid on a carnival ride the whole way to her office. Realizing that they had a couple of minutes, he took her the ‘long way around’ to work and when they landed he continued to hold her in his arms for a few seconds. She looked into his eyes and saw something that she couldn’t identify there. She reached up and placed her hand on the side of his face, caressing it as she said, “Thanks for the lift.”

#### Chapter 14 — The Second Mission — Daniel Scardino

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 025 x Gamma 120 x Tau 086

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Alt Superman had just flown Mayson to her office and as he set her on the ground in front of her office building, he asked, “Is there anything else I can do for you? Unless I get a call, I’m available.”

Her reply didn’t surprise him too much. “In view of what you can do, I may be able to utilize your unique abilities to do some research for me. What say, you willing to help me?”

“Mayson, I always help law enforcement. What do you need?”

“Could you get me the coroner’s reports for the recent deaths at the Metropolis Prison? I’d like to know what caused this recent string of deaths.”

“I might need a court order.”

“A note from me should be sufficient. Let’s go in and I’ll write up the request on my letterhead.”

After getting the request, Superman went to the prison and saw the Medical Director. The MD gave him a run around and didn’t give him the information he was after, which he thought was suspicious. Finally he did find out that no autopsy had been performed on any of the inmates that had recently died. He knew that this was unusual, to say the least, but decided to let Mayson handle it. He returned to her office, arriving just as Agent Scardino was knocking on her door.

Scardino, seeing who had just appeared next to him, was momentarily shocked, but quickly regained his composure. He was dressed rather casually in jeans and a red, yellow and blue Hawaiian shirt with a light jacket over it. Superman could see the

bulge of a side arm on his left hip. They heard Mayson cheerily say, “Come in!”

When Scardino entered, Mayson said in a somewhat deflated tone, “Oh, I was expecting Superman. You must be Agent Scardino.” Then she saw Superman behind Scardino and brightened appreciably, then trying to put a professional spin on it, she asked, “Superman, did you get that information I sent you for?”

Superman said, “I’m not sure. I did find out that there were no autopsies performed on the inmates that died recently. The MD was being very evasive. I could tell from his pulse and respiration that he was under a lot of stress when I made the request.”

“Do you think it would do any good to bring him in?”

“It just may, if he’s in collusion with the perpetrators. Your call.”

Mayson turned to Scardino and said, “Agent Scardino ...”

He interrupted her and said, “Please call me Daniel.”

She started again, “Agent Scardino, what we have is a new drug. I had a sample analyzed by STAR Labs. They say that it will mimic death.” She pulled the metal cylinder out of her bag and handed a capsule to Scardino before continuing, “Now, I started asking myself why anyone would want to do that and Superman suggested the answer even though he didn’t realize it — \*escape\*.”

Scardino asked, “Escape? Escape from where?”

Addressing Scardino, Mayson replied, “That’s exactly what I was asking myself when I remembered that recently there have been a rash of ‘deaths’ at Metropolis Prison. I asked Superman to check with the coroner about these deaths. It appears as though there have been no autopsies performed, which is unusual, to say the least, especially in cases of unexpected, sudden death. We could be looking at a sophisticated escape attempt, successfully pulled off.”

Scardino spoke up. “Initially I came here to see about this drug, but I heard about your car so now I have a second reason. I recognized the MO of the bomber. You’re lucky you weren’t killed by that bomb. Others haven’t been so lucky. I want that bomber! He’s mine.”

Superman spoke up, “Agent Scardino, you make it sound like it’s personal.”

Scardino barely looked in Superman’s direction; his eyes were glued to Mayson as he replied, “Please, call me Daniel. It is personal. I’ve seen his work before. I know his work like the back of my hand. He killed my partner. The problem is, supposedly, he died in Metropolis Prison three weeks ago. His name was Sean McCarthy. I’m the one that put him in jail. Putting two and two together and coming up with four from what you are saying and what the lab says that this drug can do, I’d say that that psycho bomber is back out.”

Mayson responded enthusiastically, “I pulled the records for the prison and the list of recent deaths is interesting. Three weeks ago, Sean McCarthy. Two weeks ago, Diego Martinez. Diego was a bank robber with a knack for getting around security systems. The only reason he was caught was a failure of one of his pieces of equipment on his last job.”

Scardino said, “I don’t see any common thread unless you were planning a bank job. You have a guy that can get past the security and a guy to blow the vault. The problem is that it has to be someone on the outside that’s recruiting them. Someone capable of creating this drug and then the means to deliver it to them in prison. Can we get the visitor logs from the prison for the periods immediately before the deaths?”

Mayson replied, “Yes, I can do that. Let me make a phone call.” She picked up the phone and dialed a number. When the phone was answered she requested copies of the visitor logs for the last three weeks from the prison. When she hung up, she



turned back to Scardino and said, “The list should be here shortly.”

Superman interrupted and said, “Uh, Mayson, I have to go. I just heard something. I’m not sure how long I’ll be gone. Maybe you should invite Agent Scardino over in my place.” He turned to the door and made his exit. After closing the door he stood there for a few seconds and listened. He heard Mayson, with a distinct lack of enthusiasm, say, “I’m making lasagna tonight, would you care to join me?”

He laughed. “With a name like Scardino, do you think I could turn down pasta? What time and where?”

Superman exited and went out on patrol.

Shortly after he left the visitor lists were delivered. They checked and found that McCarthy had been visited by an individual named Albie Swinson shortly before he ‘died’. They continued checking and found that Diego Martinez had had a similar visit by Swinson just before he also ‘died’. Mayson said, “We may be onto something here.” They continued checking and found that today’s list had an entry for Albie Swinson. Mayson called the prison and asked about the status of Buster Williams. She was told that he had just suddenly died in his cell. He was being sent to the Heavenly Rest Cemetery. She asked, “What cemetery was used for Sean McCarthy and Diego Martinez?”

Her contact at the prison said, “We have a contract with Heavenly Rest. All of the prisoners that die are sent there.”

Mayson thanked him and hung up. She turned to Scardino and said, “Feel up to a little investigating?”

He asked, “Whatcha got?”

“All of the prisoners have been sent to Heavenly Rest Cemetery. If this is an escape, someone there has to be helping. We need to see their records. If they weren’t embalmed that’s a start. Then we need to check the plots that they were buried in.”

“Gotcha. Let’s go.”

Mayson picked up her bag and they headed for the door. They took Daniel’s car to the cemetery.

They went into the office and Mayson asked to see the records for the prisoners in question. The director, Mr. Goodson, produced them. Mayson looked them over and asked, “Why were these individuals not embalmed?”

He took the records back and looked them over and said, “It must simply be a case of an oversight in the record keeping. Embalming is required by law.”

Mayson said, “In that case, let’s talk to your technician.”

As she turned away to step out of the office, Mr. Goodson produced a gun and said, “I don’t think we are going to be talking to anyone.” Mayson put her hands up in submission. “You’re going to be going for a little ride, into the crematorium. I think I have a casket large enough for both of you, now move.” He shook the gun indicating what direction he wanted them to go.

Mr. Goodson’s attention had been on Mayson but he caught movement out of the corner of his eye as Daniel started to move. Mr. Goodson started to shift his aim and snapped off a shot that caught Daniel in the shoulder. Daniel’s momentum carried him into Goodson and Goodson staggered. Mayson swung her bag and caught Mr. Goodson under the chin with it like a boxer delivering an uppercut. Mr. Goodson’s head snapped back and he fell back, unconscious.

Mayson grabbed a lamp and pulled the power cord out of the wall and used it to bind his hands behind him. After picking up his gun, she grabbed her cell phone from her bag and called 911.

The dispatcher answered, “911, what is the nature of your emergency?”

She said, “This is Mayson Drake, Assistant District Attorney, I need police and an ambulance at the Heavenly Rest Cemetery, immediately!”

The dispatcher replied, “I’m hitting the tones now. The ambulance should be there in a matter of minutes. Stay on the

line and I’ll patch you in to the police.”

Mayson heard some clicks and then another voice, “MPD, Sergeant Tartaglia, how may I help you?”

Growing somewhat frustrated with how long all of this was taking, Mayson had a hard time controlling her voice to keep from shouting as she said, “Sergeant Tartaglia, this is Mayson Drake, Assistant DA, I need a squad of police at Heavenly Rest Cemetery, \*NOW\*!” She lost the final shreds of her control and actually shouted that last word.

Very hastily, Tartaglia said, “I’ll inform Lt. Henderson, immediately!”

Sarcastically, Mayson answered, “You do that, Sergeant.”

She knelt down next to Scardino, and pulling him up onto her lap, she started stroking his forehead as she asked, “Agent Scardino, how are you?”

Moaning in pain, he grabbed his shoulder where she could see the blood staining his shirt and said, “Please call me Daniel. I’ve been better. Did we get him?”

She said, “Yes, we did, thanks to \*you\*, Daniel, if it hadn’t been for you we probably would be in a coffin by now getting a whole body hot foot. There’s an ambulance on the way, just rest easy.

He coughed and winced in pain before saying, “How’s this going to affect our dinner?”

She gave him a shy smile as she said, “If you can’t make it tonight, I’ll give you a rain check. You rest easy now; I think I hear a siren. I’m going to go out front and bring the medics in here.”

She disappeared out the door and a couple of minutes later led the way for the medics. They applied a compression bandage and loaded him onto the stretcher. As they were wheeling him out the police arrived, headed by Lt. Henderson.

Mayson handed him the gun and indicating Mr. Goodson said, “Here’s his gun. He shot Agent Scardino. Read him his rights. Charge him with attempted murder and aiding and abetting in a series of escapes from Metropolis Prison. I’ll be down to interview him later. I’m going to MetGen with Daniel.” She hastened out the door and just managed to climb in the back of the ambulance before they closed the doors.

Mayson stayed in the room with Daniel while he was examined and treated by the ER physician. Daniel’s wound was not major but they wanted him to stay in the hospital overnight for observation. The slug had passed through without hitting any bone or major vessels. He would have a nice scar as a souvenir, but he would heal rapidly.

The capture of Mr. Goodson broke the entire case wide open. Once he was incarcerated and grilled, he explained how the escape was done. From a house nearby, a tunnel had been created which led to a number of burial plots. When a coffin was placed in one of these plots while no one was around, a cover was placed over the coffin so that it wasn’t actually buried. It was then winched in through the tunnel and the inmate removed from the coffin and allowed to rest until the effects of the drug wore off. He incriminated Dr. Stanley Gables as the inventor of the drug.

Before any news of the capture of Goodson was able to leak out, the police raided the house at the end of the tunnel and found Gables, McCarthy, Martinez and Williams.

When Gables was being cuffed he was raving, obviously insane. Albie Swinson, remorseful over his part in the scheme, gave the entire story once he had been booked as an accomplice.

Gables had been a research scientist at STAR Labs and had performed an illegal experiment after developing what was called the Alpha Virus. Four technicians had died and he had been fired. He had refused to assume responsibility for his actions and had conceived a plan to take revenge. He was going to release the Alpha Virus on the city. The team of convicts he had assembled was going to break in to STAR Labs and steal a vial of the virus.

They had stopped them just in time.

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The next day Mayson went to visit Scardino in the hospital. When she entered his room, he brightened up and said, “Well, if it isn’t my favorite ADA. What can I do for you?”

“I just came to see if my favorite DEA Agent would like to cash in his rain check. I hear they are going to release you this afternoon.”

Daniel replied, “Don’t mind if I do. I may need some help, though. Got one wing in a sling.”

Mayson replied, coyly, “I think we can manage.” She left and returned to her office. A little later Superman stopped by.

“Ms. Drake, Mayson, sorry about last night. I was tied up.”

She replied, “That’s okay, Superman, it all worked out. You’ll be happy to know that Daniel and I solved the crime. It was a series of escapes. We corralled the whole gang.”

Superman looked around before he said, “I don’t see Agent Scardino. Did he return to his office?”

“Well, no, he’s in the hospital. I’m picking him up in a little while. He took a bullet meant for me. I owe him. We’re having dinner at my place tonight. Do you mind?”

“Mayson, I don’t mind. You know, I’ve really been thinking, I can’t get involved with women. If I did, they would become a target for kidnapers among other things. I don’t think you’d want to risk that.”

Mayson knew, deep down, that he was actually being chivalrous and stepping aside so that she could see Daniel, even though she still suspected that there was something there between them. A spark that could possibly have ignited into a flame if given half a chance.

### Chapter 15 — Stop the Presses Again

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Universal Locator Designation  
Alpha 025 x Gamma 120 x Tau 086  
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Rubbing his hands together, Herb said, “Well, well, my boy. I must say that you handled that excellently. After you saved Mayson, she could have become a problem, but by matchmaking her with Daniel you removed that complication. I hope that they will be happy together.”

Clark replied, “I think that they will be, or at least they will be distracted with each other long enough for Lois and Clark to firm up their relationship so that it will withstand the assault. As you always say, ‘only time will tell.’” He started chuckling as he finished up this quote.

Herb was also chuckling as he said, “Jolly good! Yes, only time \*will\* tell. Well, are you ready for the next mission? This time Clark is going to be attacked with a Quantum Disbander while he is trapped in an area where the sunlight is blocked.”

“Keep in mind that in this particular incident, Lois and Clark are already married and Lois has been promoted to the position of Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Planet. If you’re ready we will go now.”

Clark replied, “I guess that I’m about as ready to go as I ever will be.” He hefted his overnight bag as Herb pulled the TaDT out of his pocket and entered the coordinates of time and space.

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Universal Locator Designation  
Alpha 020 x Gamma 155 x Tau -180  
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Once again as they stepped through, Clark found himself on the same street as on both of the previous trips when they moved through the portal. They proceeded to the same convenience store as the last time and checked the paper. This time the masthead had Lois Lane as Editor-in-Chief so Herb said, “Well, my boy, it looks like we are right on time.”

“As usual, I will meet you in a month. I’ll meet you January 10th, at 10 a.m. Central time, in the mall at the north end of the Gateway Arch in St. Louis.” Herb pulled out his TaDT and entered the coordinates as he walked into the alley nearby. He stepped through the portal onto the mall and almost literally bumped into Clark. He said, “Well, my boy, how did it go?”

They started strolling toward the Mississippi river as they talked. Clark said, “Well, there was a point there when there was more danger to Clark than we thought. I almost failed.”

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Flashback

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As usual Clark had gone to Mazik’s and converted some gems to cash and taken lodging at the Apollo before he started looking for the local Lois and Clark.

Herb had briefed Clark on what to expect and had given him some background. He told him that the story Clark was working on dealt with a notorious computer hacker, Eric Press. The previous year he had been the one behind the hacking of the Pentagon’s mainframe. According to Jimmy Olsen, it had been the coolest prank ever and he had called Eric the ‘Michael Jordan’ of hackers. The Pentagon hadn’t been as happy about his ‘prank’ as the rest of the ‘hacking’ community but he had gotten off easy because he, at that time, was still a juvenile. Recently he had gone ‘underground’ and it had become increasingly difficult to prove he had been involved in the recent hacker attacks. His parents disclaimed any knowledge of his whereabouts.

Lois and Clark had been in the middle of the investigation into Eric Press when suddenly Perry was promoted and he had selected Lois as his replacement as Editor-In-Chief. Of course it was only on a temporary basis until a permanent replacement could be found, that is, of course, unless Lois really did a bang-up job and they decided to make the promotion permanent.

Perry had pulled Clark aside and reassured him that it had been a difficult decision and that the final point had been seniority. Lois had been with the Planet longer so she got it.

As on one of the previous missions, Alt Clark flew into the supply room just off the bullpen and watched and listened. As soon as he entered the supply room he noted some differences. The FAX and the copy machine had been moved in to free up the copy room to be used as office space. In this universe, Catherine Grant was something of a prima donna and had insisted on her own office. Perry was just as happy to accommodate her in this way since it kept her and her revealing attire out of sight, most of the time. However, the FAX and copy machines being in the supply closet could potentially cause a problem for him because it would mean more people coming in and out, interrupting him and forcing him to leave.

A copy of today’s issue of the Planet was lying on top of the copier, so he picked it up and read about an incident the previous night when Superman had been called on to evacuate a building because of a hydrogen leak. After he had removed the last lab tech and had gone back in for a double check, the building had exploded. It had started as a routine rescue until the hydrogen exploded. It was reported that a technician had stated that a computer-controlled system that controlled the flow from the hydrogen tanks had malfunctioned.

A few minutes after he got positioned, he heard the elevator ding and saw local Clark exit. Jimmy had been passing nearby as he came down the ramp and Clark stopped him and asked, “Jimmy, can you do something for me?”

Jimmy, anxious to do anything that would keep him busy and away from a girl that he thought was stalking him, said, “Anything, name it.” He turned and indicated that Clark should do the same. He was looking at the girl he was worried about. She gave him a sweet smile.

Clark was more concerned with what he needed and said,

“Uh, I need you to get a list of the last outgoing calls from Eric Press’s modem line, from before he went missing, as soon as possible.”

Jimmy said, “Gladly! I’ll pull the LEXCOM records.”

Clark clapped him on the shoulder and said, “Thanks,” as he rushed off to the staff meeting.

Jimmy, still flustered about that girl, made a show of having something to do for Clark and said, loudly, “Right, you got it, Mr. Kent. I’ll get that for you right away.” He realized that the elevator doors at his back were just starting to close so he darted into the elevator. After the doors closed he said out loud, to himself, “This is nuts.”

Lois was running through the staff and their story assignments when Clark entered and took a seat. Ralph was just outlining his current story involving the Mayor in a sex scandal.

“Ralph said, ‘Looks like page one here. Everything says that the Mayor is definitely having an affair with that call girl.’”

Lois replied, “Sounds more like tabloid page one to me.”

Ralph replied, “Agreed, except for His Honor’s pillow talk. Apparently he spills the beans on some major corruption. I’m just waiting for my source to confirm it.”

Lois said, “Okay. Keep me posted.” She turned to Clark who had entered late and asked, “Clark, are you any further along on that missing hacker story?”

With a surprised look he said, “Further along?”

Lois replied, “Do you have any new leads?”

Clark cleared his throat and said, “Nothing concrete, but I think I’m close.” Feeling the pressure to say something else, he said, “That lab explosion yesterday. It looks like it was caused by someone tapping into their computers. It could be him.”

Lois asked, “Can you prove a connection?”

He replied, “Not yet, but I’ve got Jimmy working on something that might.”

Lois said, “So, there’s no story there.”

Clark replied, “Again, not yet. I just need some time to break it.”

Lois asked, “Uh, can I talk to you outside? Just take a second.” She turned back to the rest of the staff and said, “Be right back.” She turned and left the conference room with Clark following.

As soon as the door was closed behind Clark, the rest of the staff got up and crowded the windows to see the confrontation.

Clark asked, “Lois, what are you doing? I mean, if I didn’t know any better I’d say you were trying to kill my story.”

Lois looked past Clark at the faces in the window and gave them a stern look. They faded away from the window.

Clark said, “Wait a minute, you \*are\* killing my story.”

Lois said, “Clark, I’m sorry, but I don’t have a choice. You don’t understand the pressure I’m under to generate good stories.”

Clark was becoming exasperated as he said, “It takes time to build good stories, Lois. You know that better than anyone.”

Lois heard her name being called and turned to see what was needed. A secretary said, “Ms. Lane, Copy Department on line two five.”

Lois said, “I’ll be right there.”

Clark said, “You thought there was a story there when we were working on it.”

Lois said, “That’s true, when I had one story to worry about, now I have fifty.”

The secretary shouted, “They said it’s really important.”

She turned back to Clark and said, “Let’s talk about this later. In the meantime, I want to team you up with Ralph on that mayor story, okay?”

Clark was incredulous and he blurted out, “Ralph?!?!? Lois, you’ve got to be kidding!” Clark looked back over his shoulder at Ralph as he waved while laughing at Clark’s discomfiture from

the conference room.

Just then Alt Superman saw someone headed for the supply room so he exited through the window.

Later on there was another emergency that local Superman responded to at the missile test center and Alt Superman followed from a distance.

He was watching as Superman landed and asked, “What’s wrong?”

A very frazzled scientist said, “We can’t shut it down. The computer system is actually forcing the engine to overheat.”

Superman asked, “Can’t you shut off the fuel supply?”

He replied, “The only way is to fuse the internal pump. Superman, we’ve got a nuclear warhead in the silo. If this thing explodes ...”

Superman interrupted him, saying, “Go!”

Not needing a second invitation, both of the scientists ran.

Superman went over to the rocket and stood in the exhaust and, since he was able to look directly into the propulsion system, he used his heat vision to fuse the fuel supply pump, which shut down the engine. The flaming exhaust hadn’t harmed him or even singed his Suit but he did feel slightly drained from his aura drawing so much energy to protect him. Once the engine shut down, though, the sunlight quickly recharged him and within seconds he was able to fly off.

Alt Superman flew back and hid in the supply closet again.

A few minutes later local Clark came back into the newsroom, and spotting Jimmy, asked, “How are you coming on those phone records I asked you for?”

Jimmy, not wanting to get into the middle, stuttered, “Uhhhhh, maybe you ought to talk to Lois about that. She sorta told me you weren’t on the story any longer.”

Clark rolled his eyes and looked heavenward seeking relief before heaving a frustrated sigh and brushing past Jimmy.

Clark walked into the editor’s office. Lois was sitting there admiring her name on the masthead: ‘Lois Lane — Editor In Chief’. He asked, “Got a minute, Lois?”

Embarrassed because of what she had been doing, Lois quickly closed the paper and set it aside as she said, “Oh, yeah, just, ah, checking the typesetting,” as she folded the paper.

Clark said, “I just got back from watching Superman save a test rocket from nearly exploding.”

Lois glanced out the open door to see if anyone was nearby to hear their exchange, and with a concerned look on her face, asked, “Is Superman all right?”

Clark had a more conspiratorial tone as he continued, “Yeah, he’ll live, but whoever caused it tapped into their computer system. It’s got Eric Press’ MO written all over it.”

As she rose from her chair and moved over to close the door, she asked, “Do you think it’s tied to the lab explosion?”

“Maybe, yeah, which means that obviously this isn’t some kind of prank. He’s up to something big.”

She moved back to her desk, sat down and folded her hands as with a skeptical look she asked, “Do you have any evidence to support that?”

He dropped his head in frustration and said, “No.”

She said, “So you \*still\* can’t prove a connection.”

“Lois, there’s a \*story\* here, I \*know\* it. I just have to \*find\* it.”

“Without hard facts, there is no story, honey. I’m \*sorry\*.”

He was so shocked he was stuttering, “I, I, I can’t believe you’re saying this. As a \*reporter\* you would \*never\* take that position.”

“As a \*reporter\*, no. But I’m talking as an \*editor\*. Now, if I’m wrong, I’ll take the heat for it, but I’m just trying to do what’s best for the paper.”

“And I’m trying to do what’s best for my story and for the living, breathing people of Metropolis who might buy the paper.”

Lois let out an exasperated sigh before she said, “You know you’re not the only one that fights for truth, justice and the American way; in fact, if I recall, I’m the one that coined that phrase.”

Becoming more than a little exasperated, Clark asked, “Your point?”

“My point is that \*without\* hard facts I \*can’t\* have you on this story and as the \*editor\*, I’m assigning you to \*Ralph’s\* story.”

“You don’t need a \*reporter\* for Ralph’s story; you need a \*hook and ladder\* because that boy is blowing smoke. He does not \*have\* a story!”

Lois put her hands down flat on her desk as she asked, “How do you think it makes me look when everybody sees you working on a story that I explicitly took you off of?”

“Like you’re letting me follow my reporter’s instincts.”

“You know what I think? I think that you have a real problem with the fact that I’m the one in the family wearing the tights, uh, pants, I mean pants.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Really, then why were you moping around at dinner last night?”

“Moping? How would you know, you weren’t even there half the time.”

“And you’re the one that took off in the middle of it!”

“A bridge collapsed, Lois. What do you want me to do?”

“Well, I was dealing with my own crisis.”

In frustration, Clark threw up his hands as he said, “Yeah, I noticed.” Then he turned and stalked away.

As he did, Lois said, “See, I knew this was gonna affect us!”

Clark turned with his hand on the doorknob and said, “Well, congratulations!” as he pulled on the door and it came off the hinges in his hand.

He stormed out the door that was no longer there and Lois sat down. She sighed and said, almost to herself, “First fight.”

Alt Superman had to exit hastily; he had been so absorbed in what he had been watching he almost missed someone headed for the closet. He decided to take a look around at this Metropolis.

He moved too fast or too high to be seen depending on where he was. While in the Hobbs Bay area his superhearing picked up a soft voice saying, “You Press...?” Knowing that Eric Press was missing and the object of local Clark’s current investigation, he thought that it would be prudent to check this out. He thought that maybe the kidnapers were doing the deal here. Landing silently on a nearby rooftop and looking over the parapet, he saw a gray-haired man in a trench coat and sunglasses carrying what appeared to be a rather large aluminum case. He thought, <Sunglasses, this late in the day?> Trenchcoat Man was addressing a lanky young man.

The young man said, “That’s me.” He swaggered a bit as he moved toward the man.

Trenchcoat Man sounded incredulous. “You’re the one who contacted me?”

Alt Clark had seen a picture of Eric Press and knew that this wasn’t him but he did recognize the family resemblance to him. The young man said, “Actually, that was my brother. He’s the one with the high level access.” That confirmed Clark’s supposition. It also told him that Eric Press wasn’t really missing. He was working \*with\* his brother.

Trenchcoat Man sounded bored now. “Whatever. Just so we’re clear; we’re not having this conversation, this weapon doesn’t exist, and I’m not really here.”

Press was obviously itching to get his hands on the item, so he replied with a quick, “I understand...”

There was a flat surface nearby and the man placed the case on it and opened it. Inside was a shiny device looking like a beer keg with a pistol grip, a small telescope and at the ‘business’ end,

a clear object which was probably the barrel mounted on it.

“What you’re looking at is the most deadly weapon on Earth, the Quantum Disbander, a new and improved version of the Quantum Disruptor.” As he lifted it out of the case he swung into the sales pitch. “It’s lighter and more energy conscious than its predecessor, yet still more than capable of long range target annihilation.”

The only reply Press made was a calm, “Cool.”

Trenchcoat Man enthused, “A lightning blast of supercharged particles blasts the selected target, depolarizing its molecular structure until it — disappears. Forever. Beyond permanently.”

The young man asked politely, “May I?” and extended his hands.

The man handed him the weapon and asked, “Out of curiosity, what are you going to use that for?”

Holding the weapon at arm’s length and admiring it, Press replied calmly, “Actually, I’m testing to see exactly how much force it requires to drain Superman’s super reserves which would, according to my theory, render him vulnerable, which would then, in turn, create a brief window of opportunity for me to be able to kill him. And, from everything you’ve described, this weapon sounds like it’ll do just the trick.”

The man who had been blasé was clearly appalled and ready to run.

Ethan pointed the business end at the man and asked, “Does it work like this? Oops, I forgot — you’re not really here.” Before he had a chance to bolt, Ethan pressed the trigger and Trenchcoat Man started to dissolve right in front of his eyes.

Alt Superman watched in horror as the man disappeared in a swirling ball of disassociated particles, systematically breaking him apart into a billion bits, then — poof! — what was left of him fell to the ground like fairy dust.

Press looked admirably at the gun. “Totally cool.”

Alt Superman now knew what he was here for. But he needed to wait and see what was happening because Eric Press was still missing and they needed them both if this case was to be resolved properly. He decided that he should follow this Press brother and see if he led him to his brother.

He noted the direction he was headed, and giving him a slight head start, took off to follow. The problem was that as soon as he was airborne and started looking for him, he had disappeared from sight. He started using his enhanced vision, but he ran into a problem that he hadn’t anticipated. There was a lot of lead-based paint in all of these old buildings and it was nearly impossible to see anything.

Knowing that the Press brothers now had the weapon, he would need to be extra alert in his efforts to protect Local Superman. He headed back to the Apollo.

## Chapter 16 — Revelations

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 020 x Gamma 155 x Tau -180

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After losing Press’ trail after he actually got the weapon, Alt Clark decided that the next morning he would need to be on the alert, so he got a good night’s sleep and was on duty bright and early.

While he was on the way to the Planet, Alt Superman heard the noises of a panicked evacuation. Sure enough it was another emergency at the rocket propulsion center and he was sure that local Superman was going to respond. He was closer so he was able to get there first.

Knowing that the Press brothers now had the weapon in their possession, Alt Superman knew that this could be the event he was here to guard against. He put on an extra burst of speed and moving too fast to be seen, Alt Superman slipped into the silo

while the alarms were ringing and he hid in a dark section off the floor among some structural members. He watched as almost immediately the Press brothers slipped in and hid in an area off to one side. He continued his surveillance as less than a minute later the local Superman flew in and removed the warhead from the missile and dropped it down a safety silo and closed the lid, holding it closed against the explosion by main force.

When his efforts were no longer needed to keep the lid closed, suddenly the silo doors closed, blocking the light.

The Press brothers came out of concealment Ethan Press was holding the Quantum Disbander. He said to his brother, "You see, Eric, I told you that Superman would save the day." The tone of his voice was mocking and full of self-congratulation. Then he turned to address Superman derisively, his voice almost literally dripping with disdain. "You superheroes are so predictable."

Superman crossed his arms over his chest and said, "Eric, as in Eric Press?"

Eric responded, holding out his hands in denial. "I swear, Superman; I never wanted anything to do with this."

Ethan said, "Stop groveling. Anyway, you're wasting your mea culpas on him. He won't be around long enough to exonerate you. To wit." He triggered the weapon.

When he fired at Superman, Superman staggered back and appeared to start dissolving but then quickly reformed.

Thinking that he could hide in the darkness or at least be a more difficult target, Superman used his heat vision to fuse the relays in a power panel, which killed the lights.

Ethan Press, assuming that Superman in his weakened condition wouldn't have gone very far, used the laser targeting sight to find Superman again.

Thinking only of allowing sunlight in to reenergize him, Local Superman used his heat vision again, this time against the power panel that controlled the silo doors. Ethan saw the sparks fly and laughed. He said, "You're wasting what little time you have left. I locked out that system with a computer override."

Too late, Local Superman realized he had made a mistake. Instead of the power panels, he should have targeted the weapon. Trying to remedy this error, Local Superman tried to use his heat vision against the weapon itself but found that his powers had been depleted by first the blast from the weapon and then using his heat vision against the two power panels, and was unable to do more than warm the surface slightly. Not even enough to make Ethan drop the weapon. He started mentally kicking himself for his error, but he started thinking that he wouldn't have much more time to do that. He thought about Lois. If he was going to die, he wanted his last thoughts to be of her.

Ethan Press found him with the laser targeting sight of the Quantum Disbander. He was about to pull the trigger, but just as he was about to, Alt Superman used his x-ray vision to locate the wires from the power supply and then switched to heat vision, severing the wires and rendering the weapon useless.

In apparent triumph, Ethan said, "Goodbye, Superman." He pressed the trigger and ... nothing happened. He looked at the weapon in surprise. He shook it and tried again. Still nothing happened. In dismay, he said, "Uh oh."

Just then the garage style doors at the side of the silo caved in as a result of Lois ramming them with her Jeep. Sunlight flooded the space and Superman could feel his powers being restored. He grabbed a piece of metal strut work and bent it around the Press brothers, effectively securing them until the police would arrive.

Alt Superman remained in hiding until all of the activity settled down and the Press brothers were taken away by the police.

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Jonathan and Martha were going to be coming over for dinner again. The last time dinner had been interrupted a number of times. First Lois had had several calls about problems at the

Planet, a broken down delivery truck among them. Then Clark had needed to leave because of a bridge collapse.

Lois and Clark hoped that this time they would not be interrupted and that they could have a pleasant dinner with Clark's folks.

Clark was in the kitchen preparing the meal and Lois was in the dining room setting the table when there was a knock on the door.

Lois shouted to Clark, "Honey, what time are your folks due?"

He replied, "Oh, they'll be here in about a half hour. Why?"

She responded, "There's somebody at the door. I hope it isn't a messenger from the Planet. I don't want to be interrupted again tonight." Lois answered the door and did a double take when she saw Clark at the door. She was so startled that all she could do was stammer out, "Wh, wh, wh, who, who are you?" She looked back over her shoulder in the direction of the kitchen where Clark was in the process of making dinner and started to say, "How ..."

Alt Clark interrupted her, asking, "Can I come in? It would look a little unusual for me to be standing here in the doorway since everyone would think it's my house."

Lois, shaken, said, "Yeah," and stepped back. After he passed her she stuck her head out the door and surveyed the street to see if anyone had noticed. Spotting one of her neighbors she smiled and waved before closing the door.

Obviously Clark had heard her close the door because she heard Clark from the kitchen asking, "Who was at the door, honey?"

Lois made a wide circle around this strange visitor and when she was standing in the doorway between the vestibule and the living room she said, in a very distracted tone, "Clark, you'd better come here and see this."

Clark came out of the kitchen and was confronted by himself standing just inside the front door. Clark rolled his eyes and the look on his face told the whole story, surprise, disbelief, concern, worry, as he said, "Oh no, not again. What are you, a clone? I thought we were done with all of that. Who sent you?"

With a chuckle, Alt Clark said, "No, I'm not a clone although we do share the same DNA. I've got a lot to tell you. Can we go sit down?"

Lois stepped back so that she was close to her Clark as he first x-rayed this look alike and finding no weapons or mechanism said, "Okay. Let's go sit in the living room," and he led the way with Lois, who was giving Alt Clark a wary eye the entire time, holding on to her Clark's arm.

Once they were settled, Alt Clark started the ball rolling. He looked around the room and said, "I like what you've done with the place. It looks very comfortable."

Lois automatically said, "Thank you."

Alt Clark looked directly at local Clark and said, "Today, you had a problem with the Press brothers. Did you stop to wonder why he failed to fire the final shot with the Quantum Disbander?"

Clark spoke up in response, "Yeah, I was wondering. Another shot from that device and I would not have recovered. Are you implying that you had something to do with that?"

Alt Clark replied, obliquely, "I'll answer that question in a minute. First, let me give you some background. Do you guys know anything about parallel dimensions?"

Local Clark said, "I've read about them in some science fiction stories. They always seemed rather farfetched stories to me."

Alt Clark laughed as he said, "Then I guess I'm a figment of your imagination. Parallel dimensions aren't as farfetched as you would think. You see, I'm \*from\* a parallel dimension, or as we have chosen to call them, an alternate universe. In my universe, I am you. So you see, we have the same DNA and from that aspect, I am like a clone; however, in this case it's more a case of parallel

development. We are learning more and more about alternate universes all the time. One thing we do know is that almost all of them have a Clark Kent/Superman and almost all of them also have a Lois Lane. In those where Lois and Clark get together and marry, their offspring bring about a societal change, which results in a utopian society.”

There was a sudden gasp emitted by both the local Lois and Clark as he said this.

Lois and Clark exchanged looks and said, in unison, “Offspring???” They turned to look at him. “We are going to have kids?” They reached out and grasped each other’s hands. “We were told that we couldn’t have children.”

Alt Clark smiled and said, “You just need to be patient. There are some changes that have to be made to Lois’ physiology but that will happen with time. Just keep in mind the old adage, ‘Good things come to those who wait.’”

Alt Clark gave that thought a couple of minutes to sink in before he continued, “Anyhow, to answer your earlier question, yes, I was responsible for the failure of the weapon. I was in the silo in hiding and used my heat vision to melt the weapon’s power leads.”

Local Clark said, “I don’t know how to thank you. If he had hit me again with that thing, it would have killed me.”

“Keeping you from dying in this incident was exactly why I am here. This is my latest stop on a series of missions to keep Clark Kents and Lois Lanes alive so that they can get together. Herb will be here to pick me up in a few weeks.”

Local Clark and Lois both gave a start at this. Clark blurted out, “Herb?!?!? Do you mean Herb Wells?”

Alt Clark asked, “Oh, you know Herb?”

Lois said, “Well, yeah, if not for him I wouldn’t be here. He helped us clear a curse that would have killed me immediately after our wedding night. We haven’t seen him since.”

Alt Clark replied, “I don’t know if this is the same Herb or if there are more than one. I’ve only interacted with the one, well, the same one but different ages of the same one. It gets complicated.”

He continued, “Anyhow, since I’m here, if you want to, you can take a break from being Superman and I’ll handle things for you. The two of us being seen at different places at the same time can only help your secret identity. I probably won’t contact you again unless I show up in the Suit to talk to you. Now, I think I’ll get out of here and let you guys have some together time. I understand that’s been at a premium since Lois took over for Perry as Editor-in-Chief.” Alt Clark, placing his hands on his knees, prepared to rise from the chair.

As if right on cue, the phone rang. Lois said, “Excuse me,” and answered it, “Lois Lane ... Is it the same truck again? Another one this time. Okay, how long to repair it? ... Rent another truck until the repairs are complete; in the meantime, shift portions of that route to all of the other trucks.” She hung the phone up and said to local Clark, “This was a big mistake. I wish Perry had never moved upstairs.”

Local Clark, trying to soothe her, said, “You’re doing a fine job, honey. It should get easier with time.”

Lois retorted, “Really??? Look at what happened on this story. I tried to kill it and it almost killed you. I should have let you go with your reporter’s instincts on it and supported you.”

“You did what you thought was best.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that it was the wrong decision. Oh, honey, I’m sorry.”

Alt Clark cleared his throat to get their attention. “I’ll be going now. If you need me, I’m staying at the Apollo as Charlie King. I’ll do your regular patrols and handle emergencies until Herb arrives.”

Local Clark stepped up to him and stuck out his hand. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate what you did for me, uh, us.

You saved my life and you have given us hope. Wow, kids.”

Alt Clark laughed. “Yeah, I guess I let the cat out of the bag with that one, didn’t I? Oh, here’s another thing. Herb, well, how do I explain this? \*My\* Herb may just give you guys a visit.”

Lois spoke up, “Your Herb? Why not ours?”

Alt Clark replied with a laugh, “I’m here with mine and mine knows about this and I don’t know if yours does or not. Anyhow, after I leave, \*my\* Herb may come for a visit and if he does, he will have a gift for Lois. Call it a late wedding gift or an early baby shower gift, whatever. I believe that it is something you will really get some use out of.”

Her curiosity piqued, Lois asked, “Oh, what is it?”

In a teasing tone Alt Clark said, “It’s something for you to wear, but I’m not telling you any more than that. You’re going to have to be patient.”

With a pout, Lois said, “Now you’re just being cruel. I hate to wait for presents and I hate surprises.”

Local Clark started laughing. “Yeah, I remember how you reacted when I finally told you who I was.” Turning to Alt Clark with a half smile, he said, “It wasn’t pretty.”

Lois retorted, “If you hadn’t waited so long it might just have had a different outcome. Did you ever think about that? Besides, I had already figured it out on my own. I was just getting back at you.”

Local Clark looked at Alt Clark and asked, “Is your Lois like that?” Immediately, local Clark regretted asking the question because he saw a look of unutterable sadness take over his visitor’s features. He asked, “What happened?”

Once Alt Clark had settled somewhat, he replied, “My Lois was killed during the Congo arms investigation.”

Lois reached out and put her hand on his arm as she said, “I’m so sorry. I can see how it happened, though. I was almost caught on that investigation. I just got lucky. I was following them when a group of them came out of nowhere. I had to defend myself. Fortunately, they underestimated me and I was able to escape. I had to kill one of them in order to get away. When that happened, I was able to run. I had to leave my pack behind and I had a hard time on the trail getting back but I was able to travel faster without it and I made it back to the river in a short amount of time and into Dongou where I caught a boat back to Brazzaville. When I got there I went into the local office and contacted Perry. He arranged my passage home. If you’ve ever heard an ‘I told you so’ from Perry you’ll know what I’m talking about when I say he had told me he didn’t want me on that trip because it was too dangerous.”

As Lois was finishing up, Alt Clark broke down in tears with a look of unbearable pain on his features. Lois had just confirmed his greatest fear. \*He\* was the reason she had died. Here was the proof that if he hadn’t been there she would have escaped on her own. All of the pain of her loss and the self-recrimination of the events that led up to her death came on him in a flood. He choked back a sob and fought the tears that threatened to appear.

Seeing this, Lois moved over to him and attempted to console him but all her touch accomplished was to bring it home to him that much more.

After a time, he settled down. Alt Clark swallowed the lump in his throat and finally said, “Thank you, Lois. This is the first time I’ve heard the details of the incident. Now I know how it happened and I also know why it happened. She died because in the history of my universe she was dead and I was the reason, the instrument in the hands of fate that caused her to die.”

Lois put her arms around him. She was crying for him in sympathy as she crooned to him comforting words, as local Clark also tried to comfort him as well.

After a time they separated and Alt Clark said in a defeated tone, “Thank you. At least now I know for sure. I think not knowing was actually worse.”

Local Clark asked, “Would you like to stay for dinner? My folks are coming over and they would probably like to thank you for saving my life.”

Alt Clark said, “I really don’t want to impose.”

Lois said, “It’s no imposition. There’s plenty so one more mouth to feed isn’t a problem. Besides, you’ll like Jonathan and Martha.”

“I know. I’ve met them in other universes.”

Lois’ reporter instincts had not deserted her with her move to the big office and she picked up on his statement. She said, “You’ve met them in several other universes. What about in your universe?”

Alt Clark, with a sad tone still in his voice, replied, “Jonathan and Martha Kent, my Mom and Dad, were killed in a traffic accident when I was ten years old.”

Lois threw her arms around him and started crying for him. Through her tears, she said, “Ohhhh, I’m so sorry. You \*have\* to stay now. I know that they aren’t the same ones, but they might as well be.” She had a tone of pleading in her voice as she finished up, “Please, stay and have dinner with us.”

Alt Clark relented, “If you insist. Thank you.”

Lois turned to her Clark and said, “You had better go finish dinner. I’ll stay here with him.”

Giving her a wary eye, Clark demurred from going to the kitchen.

Lois stood up and moved into her Clark’s arms. She kissed him and said, “You have nothing to worry about. It’s like he’s your twin brother, my brother-in-law.”

Clark relented, “Okay, I’ll go finish dinner.”

As Clark turned away to go finish dinner, Lois sat on the couch next to Alt Clark. She said, “Tell me a little about yourself.”

Musingly, he said, “Where to begin?”

Lois suggested, “How about when you lost your parents. What happened to you?”

He asked, “Do you know Wayne Irig?”

She said, “Yeah, we had an encounter with a wacko by the name of Trask on Wayne’s property. Wayne had found a Kryptonite meteor and Trask found out about it. He wanted to use it to kill Clark.”

“When my parents died, Wayne was made executor of the farm and I was placed into the foster home system.”

While they waited for Clark’s parents he gave her his life story.

Clark finished up in the kitchen shortly before his parents were supposed to arrive and Lois suggested a practical joke that they could play on them, so when the elder Kents arrived, Lois answered the door and ushered them in while the two Clarks stood side by side. When they saw two identical Clarks all Martha and Jonathan could do was stand there and stare.

Lois finally asked, “Well, Martha, which one is our Clark and which one is another Clark?”

Martha turned to her and said, “Our Clark, another Clark?”

Without hesitation, Martha walked over and put her arms around Clark and turned to Lois and said, “This has to be Clark.”

Both Clarks began to laugh as the other one said, “Over here, Mom. That’s our guest.”

Martha, chagrined, looked back and forth between the two, finally giving up and saying, “You are as alike as two peas in a pod.”

Laughing the entire time, Lois said, “They ought to be, he is Clark, just another Clark. You guys need to thank him. He saved Clark’s life today. If not for him, I’d be a widow right now.”

Alt Clark, somewhat embarrassed by the attention, said, “No thanks are necessary. I’m sure he would have done the same thing for me if things had been turned around.”

Local Clark said, “Well, barring any further interruption from

the Planet, let’s eat.”

The dinner party was pleasant for all. Lois didn’t have to deal with any emergencies and Clark, either one, didn’t have to leave to deal with any problems requiring super assistance.

Over dinner, the elder Kents had been very interested in Alt Clark’s story. Martha, in particular, was moved by the fact that he had had to grow up in the foster home system. When he told them the names of the families he had been placed with, in most cases they expressed their approval of the choices since they knew all of the families involved.

Eventually Alt Clark felt that the time had arrived for him to depart. As he was preparing to leave, Martha approached him and asked, “Will we see you again before you leave?”

Alt Clark replied, “I’m not sure. If you guys really want me to, I’m sure it can be arranged.”

Jonathan stepped up and putting out his hand said, “We’d like that. Just let Clark know when you are coming and we’ll be here. At least to say goodbye.”

He turned to local Lois and Clark and seeing their nods of agreement, he said, “I’ll do that. Thank you,” and exited.

A little while later the elder Kents took their leave.

Lois had just closed the door behind Martha and Jonathan, and Clark, putting his arms around her from behind, whispered in her ear, “Leave the dishes for now, I’ll take care of them later. Let’s go out back and sit on the swing for a few minutes. If we can’t hear the phone you won’t be interrupted by problems at the Planet and with him here I won’t have to respond to any calls for help. Tonight we will have no interruptions.”

Once they were seated on the swing Lois cuddled up to Clark and said, “I meant what I said earlier. I was wrong when I tried to pull you off that story. The first sign that I was wrong was when it caused our first fight. If not for his intervention, we wouldn’t be sitting here together. I’d be a widow. I don’t know if I’m really cut out for this job, I mean, if I can make that kind of mistake and that was a major mistake, I know it was. How many other mistakes am I making? The worst part is that the whole thing was totally avoidable. All I had to do was listen to you, but no, I had to have things my way.”

Clark leaned in and silenced this babble with a kiss.

When they came up for air, Lois said, “MMMMmmmmmm, that was nice. I’ve missed that these last few days.” She was thoughtful for almost a full minute and then she said, “I just made a decision. I’m going to talk to Perry tomorrow and see if he can’t make someone else acting Editor-in-Chief. I want to go back to working with you, not bossing you around.”

Clark was surprised and Lois could hear it in his voice when he asked, “Are you sure you want to do that?”

“Absolutely, I know where I belong and that’s at your side. That’s where all the action is. I liked being Editor, don’t get me wrong, but I’m just not cut out to live behind a desk. That’s just not where I want to be.”

“Where do you want to be?”

“Usually, with you.” She wormed her index finger between the buttons on his shirt. “Ah,” she breathed, “no Suit.”

Clark kissed her softly and said, “Maybe we should start working on that offspring thing.”

“Thing, there’s a thing? Does this mean we’ve made up?”

“Yes, we could definitely make out, up. How’s some time alone and undisturbed in our own room sound? We could take the phone off the hook and then take a leisurely shower together and then see where we wind up from there.”

She leaned in for another kiss as her fingers started undoing another button. When they broke from the kiss most of his buttons were open and her hands were on his chest.

She squealed in delight as he scooped her up and supersped them upstairs to their bedroom. Seconds later she found herself naked in the shower with the water cascading over her back. With

a contented sigh her arms went around his neck as her body melded to his and they started another kiss.

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The next day, Perry showed up in the editor’s office. He said, “Lois, you know, uh, it’s like this, I have a little time on my hands and thought that, maybe, if you would be willing, we could, uh, maybe, share some of the editor’s duties.”

Clark was standing there; Lois gave him a look and then turning to Perry said, “No, you may not share this office with me. I won’t have it.”

Perry was crestfallen at her response and started to turn away.

Lois said, “Where do you think you’re going?”

Perry, in a downtrodden manner, said, “You said you wouldn’t share.”

Chuckling, Lois said, “No, that’s not correct. I said, I won’t have it. I meant the office! If you want it back, it’s yours. Last night I decided that I didn’t want it anymore. I was going to ask you if you wanted it back, but you beat me to the punch!”

Afterward Lois wished that she had had a camera to capture the look of joy on Perry’s face when this all sunk in.

Lois walked over and picked up her nameplate and carried it with her as she stepped over to Clark and put her arm around him and said, “Let’s go, partner, there are stories out there waiting for us to write them.”

Perry chuckled as he watched them disappear out the door. He walked over and sat behind his desk with a look of contentment on his face.

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A couple of weeks later, Alt Clark contacted local Clark and they set up another dinner party.

This time as Alt Clark was about to leave, Lois threw her arms around his neck and gave him a kiss on the cheek and said, “I don’t know how to thank you. It has been wonderful not having Clark running out for rescues all the time. We have had some nice together time, thanks to you.”

Alt Clark replied, “I’m glad I was able to help out.”

After Lois released him, he addressed both Lois and Clark and said, “Remember, look for \*my\* Herb to visit. I’m sure that you’ll appreciate the gift he will bring. I wish you a long and happy married life.” He shook Clark’s hand. Martha gave him a hug and Jonathan shook his hand before he exited to go meet Herb.

### Chapter 17 — The Green Green Glow of Kryptonite

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 020 x Gamma 155 x Tau -180

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Herb said, “Well, my boy, you have been on a good number of missions.”

Clark acknowledged with a modest pride, “Yeah, eleven so far.”

Herb continued, “Are you ready to try one more time?”

Flushed with success and happy that in all of his missions to date he had been able to not only save the Clarks, but in some cases the Lois Lanes and in at least one case Mayson, he said, “Sure, Herb, I guess so. How many more of these missions do I need to go on?”

“Not many more now, my boy, not very many at all.”

“Okay, where to now? What’s the incident?”

“Well, my boy, we are going to Smallville this time. You see, early on, shortly after Prime Clark went public as Superman, there was a rogue government group out to destroy him because they thought that he was a threat. They were called Bureau 39. They had started out as part of Project Blue Book, but this group, after being ‘officially’ disbanded, stayed together and active hunting down alien artifacts. Once Superman made his

appearance they went after him. A sample of Kryptonite had been sent to Wichita for analysis by Wayne Irig. They had heard about it and wanted a larger sample to use as a weapon against Superman. Superman in Prime was very nearly killed by Colonel Trask in that encounter. Fortunately, Lois arrived with Rachel Harris just in the nick of time and Rachel killed Trask. We need to make sure that Trask fails, even if Rachel Harris doesn’t arrive in time.”

Clark said, “Kryptonite again, huh? Oh well, maybe I can avoid exposure. Alright, let’s do this.”

Herb pulled out his TaDT and set in the date, time and space coordinates. A portal opened in the air in front of them and they stepped through.

Herb turned to Clark and said, “You probably recognize exactly where you are. This is the lower forty of the Kent farm. As near as I can tell, Bureau 39 is conducting a dig on the Irig farm. The Kryptonite is actually being hidden on the Kent farm. If Colonel Trask is able to acquire the Kryptonite sample that is here, he could possibly kill the local Clark or you if you are mistaken for him. Be careful, my boy. I wouldn’t want to see anything happen to you.”

Clark replied, “I’ll be careful.”

Herb said, “As usual, I’ll pick you up in a month. Let’s meet at Arlington National Cemetery. I’d like to observe the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns December 15<sup>th</sup> at 10 a.m.

“Okay, Herb. I’ll meet you there. I just hope I have as much success this time as I have had on all the other missions.”

Herb pulled out his TaDT and punched in a time, date and location. A portal opened and he stepped through. He looked around and didn’t immediately spot Clark. Eventually he spotted him in the crowd watching the ceremony and walked over to him. They stood side by side and silently observed the ceremony. When it finished they strolled away, walking the paths among the gravestones. Herb said, “Let’s go over there and sit on that bench for a moment.”

They walked over and sat on the bench and after a few moments of contemplation, looking at all of the graves of the fallen, Herb started the conversation. “Well, my boy, how did it go? I already know that you were successful. How did you handle it?”

“Well, Herb, yeah, Clark’s alive, but it is no thanks to me. I was there, but I wasn’t the one to save him. If it hadn’t been for Rachel Harris he’d be dead now. I guess things worked out the way they were supposed to, but it was too close for comfort. Unfortunately, Colonel Trask lost his life. I wasn’t fast enough to save him.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, my boy. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

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Flashback

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 030 x Gamma 100 x Tau 185

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Immediately after Herb had left, Clark had proceeded to the vicinity of the Kent homestead.

As he was approaching, he could feel the pain of Kryptonite exposure and knew that the Kryptonite Herb had told him about was nearby and out in the open. He used his enhanced vision and looked into the barn. He saw the open case and the green Kryptonite. He thought, <<“Uh oh, crystalline Kryptonite. The worst kind and it’s pretty big. That’s going to have to be dealt with before Trask gets his hands on it.>>

When he had finished his examination he turned around and



went the other way. As soon as he was in an area that afforded some concealment, he spun into the Suit and took off. He flew to the outskirts of Smallville and spun back into his regular clothes. Walking into town he bent his course to a sheet metal shop that he was familiar with. Fortunately, they were still open, even with the Corn Festival going on. Entering the shop, he asked for and received two fairly large pieces of lead sheeting. Leaving the shop, he returned to the farm. Using his heat vision to soften the lead, he formed it into a cup large enough for the Kryptonite meteor to sit in. The second sheet he formed into a lid to cap the cup with. He made a wide detour around the barn and made his way to the front door while the Kents were in the kitchen with Clark. As soon as he reached it, he knocked on the door.

Martha left Jonathan to handle Clark and she moved to the front door. Cautiously she looked out the window before opening it and stood there aghast at what, or actually, who she saw. She called, "Jonathan, come here, please!"

Jonathan left Clark and joined Martha at the door. When he saw Clark outside, his curiosity was aroused and he opened the door. "May I help you?" he asked politely, but in a very distracted manner. He, as Martha had been, was shocked by the striking similarity in appearance between this visitor and their boy.

Alt Clark spoke up. "Mr. and Mrs. Kent, I'm here to help Clark. Inadvertently, you have exposed him to a fragment of rock from his home planet. That rock that Wayne Irig gave you to hide is a meteorite. Clark was fortunate that the chest that Wayne placed it in for safekeeping was made of lead. The lead shielded him from the radiation. When you opened that chest to show him the contents, you exposed him to the radiation. Continued exposure can be fatal. In the kitchen he isn't yet far enough away from it. You need to move him to the front porch. As soon as you've done that, Mr. Kent, please go to the barn and place the Kryptonite into this bowl of lead and place this cap on top. Lead blocks the radiation that harms us. He'll start to recover as soon as this is done."

Jonathan immediately turned and went to the kitchen and assisted Clark to move to the porch. As Jonathan was helping him to a chair, he asked, "Why not just close the chest?"

Alt Clark responded, "Wayne Irig would recognize that chest and his recognition could be critical."

As soon as local Clark was seated in a rocker Jonathan almost literally ran to the barn carrying the lead bowl and cap. A few seconds later Alt Clark could feel the pain disappear. He moved over and picked up local Clark and carried him back into the house and upstairs to his room. Martha followed in his wake. He laid Clark on his bed and covered him with a quilt. As he stood up, he said to Martha, "Keep him warm and let him sleep. When he wakes he needs to sit out in the sun. That will start restoring his powers."

As he was finishing up on his directions to Martha, Jonathan reappeared. Alt Clark said, "You must have a million questions. Let's go downstairs." Jonathan led the way with Martha trailing behind. When they reached the living room, Alt Clark said, "I'm sorry for the abrupt appearance and bossing you around that way. I didn't have much choice. I could still feel the Kryptonite and knew the pain he was in."

Martha, ever courteous despite the circumstances, said, "Please, let's all sit and be comfortable."

Clark took a chair and the Kents sat on the sofa, holding hands. "Okay, my name is Clark Kent and I'm from a parallel dimension. I'm here to see to it that your Clark isn't killed."

Jonathan and Martha both had startled expressions as he was talking.

"The first step in that process is this, Mr. Kent; I would request that you give me that lead enclosure with the Kryptonite in it. I need to first seal it up with my heat vision and then launch it into space so that it can't harm either one of us again."

Jonathan said, "Right away," as he jumped up and moved to the barn. Clark got up and followed him and waited just outside the barn for Jonathan to bring the enclosure out.

Clark accepted it. First he used his heat vision to seal the cap to the bowl and then he said, "Thank you. I'll be right back." Alt Clark spun into the Suit and took off, straight up. When he reached the ionosphere he launched the enclosure with all of his might and watched it disappear into space. He turned and retraced his path, landing next to Jonathan and spinning back into his regular clothes. They moved back to the house, rejoining Martha in the living room.

After settling in the chairs Alt Clark started again. "Now that the Kryptonite is taken care of, we can relax and talk. Clark has been exposed to crystalline Kryptonite, which is the strongest, most hurtful form. He will be without his powers for 24 to 36 or as much as 72 hours even after only that brief exposure. This could actually help him to conceal his secret identity. Currently there is a rogue military unit, called Bureau 39, looking for him. When they find him he will be powerless and be removed from their list of suspects, especially as I will be around as Superman. It is unfortunate that an exposure like this will not really help in any other way. Kryptonite isn't something that repeated exposures can help build up your resistance. Every exposure will be just as debilitating as all the rest."

Martha spoke up. "You say that you are Clark, how can that be?"

Clark decided to use an illustration he had used before. "I guess the easiest way to explain is this, think of an onion. When you slice across an onion and look at the sliced part you see numerous layers. The universes are like that, many layers side by side. I'm from one of the other universes. I am in the process of looking for Lois Lane. NO, not the one that is here with Clark, but Lois Lane none the less. You see, most of the universes have their own Lois and Clark and it is critical that they be brought together. Their marriage is critical to the future of each universe. Their union is what brings about a utopian society in the future. I realize that it is very early in their relationship but you must do everything you can to foster their relationship. They have to get married."

Martha asked, "If that's the case, why are you here, helping our Clark instead of home with your Lois Lane?" As she was asking this question she saw a sad expression overtake his features and she said, "Oh, that's the answer, she's not there for you."

Alt Clark said, "You are very perceptive in every universe. Yes, you are correct. My Lois, my soul mate, was killed on an investigation. I am going from universe to universe doing my best to keep the local Clark Kent alive so that he can fulfill his destiny with his Lois. If I fail or if I find a universe without a Clark I will be there for that Lois and perhaps fulfill my own destiny."

Martha said, "What has happened to my manners? Would you like some lemonade?"

Clark replied, "That would be very nice, thank you."

Just then a car pulled up in front and parked. Clark used his enhanced vision to see who it was and saw Lois jump out of the car and head for the door.

Alt Clark said to Jonathan, "Uh oh, it's Lois. Clark's down for the count. I'll have to try to take his place."

Jonathan said, "Good luck," as he got up to answer the door. Opening the door, he said, "Well, Lois, you seem to be in a hurry."

Lois said, "Hi, Jonathan, where's Clark?" She spotted him in the living room and said, "Okay, Clark, let's go. We have to go see what's happening at Irig's. I got that reply with the list of EPA sites and the Irig place isn't on the list."

Clark said, "Come on in for a minute, Lois. Mom's getting

some lemonade.”

She replied, “Look, who’s top banana around here? I said, let’s go. Get your butt in gear, Kent!”

Turning to Jonathan, he said with an air of resignation, “Duty calls. Tell Mom I’ll have the lemonade when we get back.”

Lois turned and headed out the door. As she did so, Clark turned to Jonathan and said, sotto voce, “When Clark gets up make sure he dresses in the same clothes I have on. We’ll switch back after he’s up,” then he headed out the door in Lois’ wake. They climbed into the car and Lois took off, headed for Irig’s. When they got there, Lois parked and they climbed out of the car. They approached the barrier. Ms. Carol Sherman approached and Lois produced her list and in a challenging tone said, “It seems that this site is not on the EPA list.”

Ms. Sherman replied, “We can match paperwork if you want to do that.” She handed Lois some papers. “This is our certificate granting us access to EPA Superfund status. This is the property rights waiver. This is our authorization from Smallville city hall and this is the updated list of what you have, see, there’s Smallville right there.”

Clark said, “She’s right, Lois”

Lois asked, “Can I have a look at that?”

Ms. Sherman handed over her clipboard and Lois began looking at the papers.

Ms. Sherman said, “It always takes Washington about six weeks to figure out what the people in the field are up to.”

While Lois was arguing with Ms. Sherman, Clark used his x-ray vision to look at the contents of a nearby tent. He saw Wayne Irig in custody with several guards and one individual questioning him. Clark presumed that to be Trask, the individual he had been warned about.

Ms. Sherman continued, “I can make a call if you like.”

Lois said, “Do that, and while you’re at it, we definitely need to speak to Mr. Irig.”

Ms. Sherman replied, “I told you, he’s been relocated during the disruption.”

Lois challenged, “Yes, but you didn’t tell us where.”

“Because I don’t know! Probably one of the motels.”

“I doubt that, all of the rooms around here are booked up months in advance, or maybe you haven’t heard of the famous Smallville Corn Festival.”

Ms. Sherman said dismissively, “The government has pull,” as she turned to walk away.

Sarcastically, Lois said to her retreating back, “I bet it does.”

Lois and Clark turned and returned to the car. They drove back into Smallville and to the Corn Festival, getting something to eat and sitting down at a table with a checked tablecloth that looked like it came from Maisie’s Café.

As Lois was rifling through her bag and pulling out various items, Clark was munching on a potato chip as he said, “Alright, in four hours we’ve checked and all we know is that in twenty years there have been no permits and no citations issued on the Irig property.” Lois opened her notebook and slamming it down on the table, gave Clark a look. Alt Clark started to get worried. Had he made a blunder? Had he given himself away somehow? Did she know that he wasn’t \*her\* Clark Kent? He tried to cover up and asked, “What’s the matter?”

She replied, “Don’t mind my friend Lois, she’s from Metropolis!”

Relieved that none of his fears were being realized, he went with it. “Well, you were coming off a bit ... intense.”

Lois was getting exasperated as she replied, “Intensity might be a crime in Smallville, but in Metropolis it’s a survival skill.”

Properly chastened, he shut up and grabbed another chip.

Just then the waitress, a blond, walked up and asked, “Clark \*Kent\*?”

Clark, with an embarrassed chuckle, said, “Hi.”

She said, “Your mother said you were here for the Daily Planet.” She set a Dixie cup of water down in front of him as she turned to Lois and said, “So. Ah, this must be Lois?” as she set a cup down in front of Lois.

Lois turned to her and asked, “How’d you guess?”

Putting out her hand, she introduced herself. “I’m Maisie.” Then she shook Lois’ hand and asked, “How’s the writing coming? I just love to read a good romance novel.”

As she was asking, Lois’ countenance fell and a look of utter disbelief and betrayal took over as she turned to Clark. If looks could kill, this one would have even given Superman pause. Clark stuttered, “I must have, uh, accidentally uh, mentioned it to my mother who might have ...”

Lois finished up for him, “Accidentally told the whole town.”

Maisie tried to defuse the situation by saying, “That’s just Smallville for you, honey, everybody knows everything about everybody else.”

Lois got a smug look on her face as she asked, “Then why haven’t I heard any dirt on Clark, here?”

Maisie started putting down the menus as she said, “Well, with Clark here, what you see is what you get. Here ya go. Back in a jiff.”

Lois started to smile as she picked up the menu and said, “What you see is what you get, hummmm?”

Suddenly Lois’ cell phone rang. When she grabbed for it she knocked Clark’s water into his lap.

Embarrassed, she said, “Oh, sorry,” with a shrug.

She answered, “Lois Lane.”

She got a startled expression as she blurted out, “Mr. Irig! Where are you?”

He said, “Somewhere outside of Salt Lake City.”

Incredulously she blurted out, “Salt Lake City!”

She heard, “Well, I, uh, I just got in my Winnebago and decided to go visit my sister. I’ve been on the road so long I hardly know where I am.” There was something funny in the way Irig said it, though. It sounded wooden, like he was reading off of a script.

Lois said, “Mr. Irig, I’m gonna put you on with Clark Kent.”

As she handed Clark the phone, she mouthed, “This is weird.”

Clark said, “Hello, Wayne, uh, can I have a number where I can call you back?”

He heard, “I don’t see one here. I’m in a truck stop.”

Clark asked, “Well, what did the EPA guys tell you about the work they were doing on your property?”

“Just that they needed to do some diggin.”

Clark asked, “Wayne, is everything okay?”

“Uhhh, yeahh, no, no problem. Uh, looks like somebody else needs to use the phone, uh, goodbye, Clark.”

Clark said, “Wait, Wayne, I ...” He heard a click as he was cut off.

Questioningly, he asked Lois, “Salt Lake City?”

With a determined look on her face, she said, “That’s where he said he was calling from.” Thinking for a couple of seconds, she continued, “Could have been anywhere.” After a few more seconds, she said, “Let’s go mingle. See what we can see.”

They spent some time interviewing people and then they went back to the farm.

When they got back to the farm, they moved inside and Alt Clark excused himself to go upstairs. Local Clark was awake and up. He marveled at his lookalike but didn’t question it as his parents had briefed him on his presence. Alt Clark filled him in on what he and Lois had been doing and insisted that local Clark take his rightful place at Lois’ side, promising to return as Superman.

After Clark went downstairs to join Lois, Alt Superman exited Clark’s room through the window and flew down to the

front porch. Stepping up, he knocked on the door. He heard Martha shout, “Clark, see who’s at the door, please.”

Local Clark opened the door and said, “Come on in, Superman.”

Lois was startled and asked, “What are \*you\* doing here?”

### Chapter 18 — Trask

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Universal Locator Designation  
Alpha 030 x Gamma 100 x Tau 185  
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Alt Superman replied, “Lois, I go wherever there is a problem and right now that happens to be Smallville. I heard about an EPA investigation. In a farming community, environmental problems can be serious. While here I thought I’d stop by and see how Clark was. I had heard he wasn’t feeling his best.”

Local Clark replied, “Oh, I’m okay now, Superman. Thanks for your concern.”

Superman replied, “You know I always worry about you. After all, you are one of my best friends.”

Turning to Lois, Superman said, “In answer to your question, I’m not convinced that this is really an EPA investigation. From the reports I’ve seen and Clark’s testimony, Wayne Irig has never used dangerous pesticides on his farm. I did hear that recently Mr. Irig found an odd rock which he sent part of off to a lab for analysis. Not that long ago there was a rogue government agency that invaded the Planet trying to find a way to get to me. I believe that the same rogue agency is involved in this. I believe that they are after that rock, which for some inexplicable reason they believe that by doing so they will find the means of incapacitating or killing me.

Lois was shocked to hear this and it was obvious by the look on her face and in her tone as she asked, “Why would they want to do that? You’re the best thing to happen to us for centuries! You’ve never harmed anyone! All you’ve done is help! Let’s call the President, the Joint Chiefs, somebody! How can they expect to get away with this?”

Superman shook his head and said, “Lois, I think we can handle this without getting them involved. I really think that the local police can handle it, at least initially. We have to prove to Trask and his minions that what they are looking for really doesn’t exist and while doing that lure them into a trap. I have an idea that might just bring them to account. Why don’t the two of you go on back into town and see if you can spot anything unusual?”

Clark, Lois and the Kents all went back into town and the Corn Festival. Clark and his folks sat at one of Maisie’s tables and quietly discussed his status. Martha said, “Superman said you’d be okay in a little while. Initially I was thinking about taking you to a doctor, but what could a doctor do?”

Clark said, “I guess I just need to have some ‘normal’ time.”

Just about then, Lois walked up wearing a different dress and a pair of boots.

Pleased to see that she was at last trying to fit in, Clark asked, “What is this?”

Coyly she replied, “When in Smallville ...” She gave a little giggle as Clark gave her a very appreciative look and a nod.

A little later they heard some music and went over and joined in on the line dancing.

Surprised, Clark said, “You really know how to do this.”

Lois replied, “A year ago, one of my girlfriends convinced me it was a great way to meet guys.”

Clark asked, “Was it?”

Laughing, she replied, “Define guys!”

Later Lois was eating a caramel apple and as they walked by the strength test, Lois said, “Okay, Clark, let’s make this a day to

remember.”

Clark, seeing what she was looking at, said, “Uh. No.”

Lois pulled out a ticket and said, “Here you go, sir, “ as she chuckled.

Clark took the hammer and swung. The weight made it to Hercules before falling back.

He pulled out another ticket and asked, “Can I try that again?”

This time the weight almost made it.

Lois said, “That was very close, okay, one more,” as she handed over the third ticket.

This time Clark gave it all that he had and he rang the bell, declaring himself to be a Superman, which was the rating for that feat.

Lois cheered, and laughing and smiling, threw her arms around his neck and patting him on the back, gave him a hug. She said, “You did it!”

They broke from the clinch and the ticket taker held up two prizes. A Superman and a black and white teddy bear. He said, “Your choice.”

Clark was uncomfortable and Lois started looking back and forth between the two; finally she grabbed the teddy and clutched him to her chest as she leaned back into Clark. She turned and putting her arm through Clark’s, they started walking away. As they started to walk she had a big smile on her face and she was very bubbly as she said, “You know, Clark, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so, I don’t know, so relaxed. You’re a different Clark.”

He replied, “That’s what I am, Clark!” He chuckled.

While Lois and Clark were doing all of this, Superman was putting his plan into effect. The first step in his plan required that Superman have some ‘Kryptonite’ for Trask to find. To accomplish this, Alt Superman flew over to Reeves Overlook. There was a quartz outcropping there and he broke off a good-sized chunk and carried it with him as he flew to Wichita, where he found a manufacturer of watches. Superman spoke to the manager and asked if he could use some of his luminous paint. The manager readily agreed to his request. Superman used a tool to partially hollow out the crystal in an irregular pattern. Then using his heat vision, he softened the glass of an eyedropper and lengthened and narrowed the tube. Using this eyedropper he first sucked up the paint and then injected it into the channels he had created in the quartz. When he finished, the crystal had an eerie greenish glow.

He then found a clothier and asked to use some dye. He was able to use his heat vision to cause the dark green dye to adhere to the surface of the crystal. The color wasn’t exactly that of Kryptonite, but it was very close and it glowed with an inner light. He thought, <It doesn’t look exactly like the Kryptonite, but since Trask in all probability didn’t see the actual sample he shouldn’t know the difference.> He flew back to Smallville and put the quartz into the original container. This he placed in the Kent barn where the original sample had been. He knew that Wayne would recognize his chest and if Trask saw his recognition it would help with the deception.

He called Jonathan Kent out to the barn and he discussed his plan with him. It would be a little dangerous, although he promised to protect all of them, he had another mission to perform.

Trask had caught Clark and Lois as they had been snooping around the Irig farm. He had had Lois confined in another tent while he interrogated and then offered a deal to Clark. As he was doing this, one of his subordinates came into the tent and said, “We found Irig. He’s on an access road that leads to the Kent farm.”

Trask turned to Clark and said, sarcastically, “You didn’t tell me that this was a family affair.” Turning to another subordinate, he ordered, “Bring him,” as he moved out of the tent.

Clark was manacled and led out to a van where he was chained up. He felt the van moving as he was jostled around in the back. Eventually the van stopped and the back doors opened. Trask confronted him and said, “We have your family. I’ll make a deal with you. You give me Superman and I’ll let them live.”

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Unbeknownst to Lois or Clark, Jimmy Olsen had been sent to get pictures and had seen Clark being manacled. He had hightailed it in to town and alerted the sheriff. As they were on the way to the Irig farm, a call came in on the police radio for the sheriff. The dispatcher said it was a woman talking about UFOs and the government and Superman. She said it was probably a crank but the sheriff realized, from the description, just who it was and said, “Patch her through.” Then keying her mic again, she said, “Go ahead, Lois.”

Lois was frantic as she said, “Sheriff, you have to get to the Kent farm, immediately.”

Rachel replied, “I’m on my way to the Irig farm to check out the disturbance there.”

Lois said, “That’s where I am. You need to get to the Kent farm. The Kents are in danger.”

Rachel put on her lights and siren and took off.

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Clark was mulling over Trask’s offer and stalling for time. The other Superman had told him to do just that, but he didn’t know just how long he could. He felt so helpless, being without his powers and having to depend on the other Superman, but that was the hand he had been dealt. He just had to do the best he could to give him the time he needed.

Given this alternative, Clark asked, “Do I have your word on that?” He had decided on a desperate ploy. He just hoped it would work. The fact that right now he was vulnerable could make or break the situation, but he had to try.

Trask said, “Of course you have my word.”

Clark said, “Okay, then, he’s right here. I’m Superman.”

Trask sneered at him as he pulled his sidearm. Trask jacked the slide back, apparently to chamber a round, and then he pointed the gun at Clark.

Seeing this action, Clark was afraid that he had overplayed his hand. Being vulnerable, if Trask shot him he could actually be seriously injured or even die. Fear took over and Clark cringed back and shouted, “No, Trask, no!”

Trask pulled the trigger and all that they heard was the metallic click of the hammer falling on the firing pin. There was no explosion because he hadn’t loaded a round into the breach. Clark slumped back as far as the chains would allow. Trask laughed as he said, “That was \*fear\*, Mr. Kent, stark terror. This gun wouldn’t harm Superman so he wouldn’t be afraid. So much for you being noble and trying to shield Superman. Now, where is he?”

Clark kept his mouth shut even in the face of Trask’s raging menace.

Trask said, “Maybe you won’t talk on your own account, but what about your family?” Trask picked up a can of gasoline and poured some out in the barn where he had Jonathan and Martha Kent, as well as Wayne Irig, tied up. Then he poured a trail out the door and out to where Clark could see it from the back of the van. He jacked the slide again after seating the magazine. “This time I’m not kidding. Now, you tell me just where Superman is or I start on you. First the knees, then the elbows. Do I need to draw you a diagram? If that doesn’t work . . .” He pulled out a matchbook and held it up for Clark to see.

Just then Superman landed next to Trask and removed his weapon from his hand and crushed it. “You want Superman, Trask? I’m right here.” Superman then stepped into the van and broke Clark’s shackles. He asked, “Did he hurt you, Clark?”

“No, he didn’t. Thanks to you he didn’t have the chance,

Superman. He was just about to, though.”

While Superman was in the van, Trask struck a match and dropped it on the gas trail.

Superman said, “Excuse me, Clark.” He jumped down out of the van and sped over to where the gas was burning and sucked the flames up by inhaling them. When he had succeeded in putting the fire out, he blew the fumes out up into the air as smoke.

Trask grabbed the lead-lined container that had the Kryptonite in it and opened it just as Superman started to approach him. As Trask opened the container, Superman gasped and grasped at his chest and had a look of pain on his face.

Sensing victory, Trask had a look of pure joy on his face and he was gloating as he said, “Well, Superman, you think you’re so much better than us, flying around, well, this little piece of home will be the death of you.”

Superman dropped the act that he was putting on and stood up and crossed his arms over his chest. When he did this Trask got a look of fear on his face, which was immediately overtaken by snarling rage, the rage of the insane. Superman said, “I don’t think so, Trask. I don’t know what you think that is, but it doesn’t bother me at all.”

Superman picked up the ‘Kryptonite’ and tossed it from hand to hand, finally saying, “Sorry to deprive you of your toys, but I don’t see any practical use for this.” He cocked his arm back and launched the crystal into space just to demonstrate that he was in fact not being harmed.

He grabbed Trask and said, “You are going to have a lot of explaining to do, Trask, and charges to be faced; at least 5 counts of kidnapping and attempted murder as well as relatively minor counts of assault, fraud, terroristic threats and destruction of private property. I really think I need to inform you that Clark was doing everything he could to delay you because I had another mission to handle. I have just returned from Washington where I had a meeting with the Joint Chiefs about you and your little band of renegades. The Air Force has disowned you and they have all condemned your activities. There is a group of Military Police from Fort Leavenworth on their way to take you and your followers into custody.”

Just as Clark was climbing down out of the back of the van, Sheriff Harris drove up with Jimmy in her patrol car and a deputy drove up in another car. Jimmy grabbed his camera and started snapping pictures of Superman with Trask in custody and Clark looking weak and shaken over by the van.

Another police car that had been dispatched to the Irig farm arrived with Lois just as the deputy that arrived at the same time as Sheriff Harris took charge of the prisoner. He put the cuffs on him and read him his rights, but he made an error and cuffed him with his hands in front. Lois ran over to Clark and helped him stand, offering him a shoulder for him to lean on. Once he was upright she threw her arms around him and gave him a hug. She wasn’t saying anything, but nothing needed to be said. The hug said it all.

Seeing this, Sheriff Harris nodded her understanding of how things stood. Yes, Clark had taken her to the Senior Prom, but that was in the past and she could see that Lois was in his future. Heaving a disappointed sigh over things that might have been, she turned to her deputy and said, “Stand by until we have the details.” Then she turned to Superman. She asked, “Okay, Superman, what do we have here?”

“Well, Sheriff, if you look in the barn you’ll find Wayne Irig, Jonathan and Martha Kent all tied up. I wouldn’t strike any matches around here for a while. Trask tried to murder them by arson. He was about to murder Clark Kent and would also have murdered Lois Lane if he hadn’t been stopped. He is obsessed to the point of insanity with my destruction. I just hope he doesn’t get off on an insanity plea. There is a group of MPs on the way

from Ft. Leavenworth to take them all into custody.”

Sheriff Harris turned to the deputy that had custody of Trask and said, “Take him in and book him on multiple counts of kidnapping, attempted murder and arson. I’ll be in later.”

Lois spoke up, “Sheriff, Carol Sherman, the woman over on the Irig farm, was duped into participating in this. She’s the one that set me free and helped me contact you. Go easy on her, okay?”

Rachel said, “I’ll do what I can. You may need to testify on her behalf.”

Before moving Trask to the car, the deputy was watching as the sheriff went into the barn. The sheriff needed to see what was there so that she could give eye witness testimony. She called Jimmy over. “Mr. Olsen, do you still have your camera handy?”

Jimmy replied, “Yes, I do, Sheriff. What do you need?”

“Could you take some crime scene pictures for me?”

“Sure thing, Sheriff, just tell me what you want.”

Rachel had Jimmy take pictures of the Kents and Wayne before she untied them and the gasoline trail as well as Clark in his depleted condition. Seeing that Clark would be okay for a couple of minutes, Lois went over to the barn to help release the Kents. After they had untied the Kents and Wayne Irig, they exited the barn together and Rachel noted the condition of Wayne Irig’s hand and asked him about it.

Wayne said, “That fella Trask, he wasn’t EPA! He was with something called Bureau 39, I overheard them talking. He injected me with some kind of babble juice and when that didn’t work he started busting my fingers.”

Rachel said, “Wayne, now, I want you to get yourself into the hospital and get those fingers taken care of and tell them that I need a copy of the report, you hear me?”

Wayne replied, “Right, Sheriff.”

Rachel turned to another one of her deputies and said, “Coop, why don’t you take Mr. Irig here and get him into the ER so that he can get those fingers tended to.”

Deputy Cooper replied, “Right, Sheriff, this way, Mr. Irig.”

Rachel said, “Oh, Coop, why don’t you give Mr. Olsen here a ride back to town. He left his car there.”

Deputy Cooper replied, “Sure thing. Mr. Olsen, you can ride in the back.”

Rachel turned to Clark and said, “How are you, Clark? You don’t look the best. Do you need to go to the hospital too?”

Clark replied, “No, I don’t think so, Rachel. I’ll be okay.”

Superman moved over and started talking to Clark.

Unnoticed by anyone, Trask had produced a double-barreled derringer from somewhere and was lining up for a shot at Clark. Looking up from where she had been examining Wayne’s hand, Rachel saw this, shouted a warning, drew her sidearm and snapped off a shot. Since she was at right angles to Trask the bullet entered under his right arm. The impact spoiled his aim and the derringer fired into the air as he was hit. The bullet had passed through the right lung and penetrated the heart. Trask collapsed, dead before he hit the ground.

Rachel moved over and stood above Trask. She said, “Don’t touch anything.” She raised her voice slightly as she said, “Mr. Olsen, before you go, I have \*one\* more job for you.” Then she addressed her deputy, “Coop, call for an ambulance, please.”

Deputy Cooper moved over to his car and got on the radio. When he finished, he reported to the sheriff, “An ambulance is on the way, Sheriff.”

“Thanks, Coop. Stand by till they clean up.”

“Will do, Sheriff.”

While this had all been happening, Lois had rushed over and thrown her arms around Clark again. She said, “He wasn’t aiming at Superman, he was aiming at you! Why?”

Clark shrugged and said, “Who knows what goes on inside the mind of someone like that?”

Jimmy moved over and started taking more pictures. He made sure to catch pictures of the derringer as well as Trask. Jimmy was really earning his crime photographer stripes on this trip.

As soon as Jimmy finished up, Cooper went into his trunk and brought out an evidence kit. He donned a pair of rubber gloves and pulled out a plastic bag. He picked up the derringer and placed it in the bag. He sealed it and wrote the details on the outside. He did the same with the gun that Superman had crushed. Both bags went into the kit and back into the trunk.

Obviously shaken by the incident and disturbed by the fact that she had been required to take a life, Rachel turned to Superman and with a somewhat morbid sense of humor said, “I guess we don’t have to worry about an insanity plea now.”

Rachel turned to Lois and said, “Lois, it sure looks like you have more influence over Clark now than I ever did. You take care of him now, you hear?”

Lois looked at Clark, then she smiled at Rachel and said, “I’ll take care of him, Sheriff.”

Coming out of her morbid mood somewhat, Rachel chuckled and said, “Lois, why don’t you just call me Rachel. After all,” Rachel nodded in Clark’s direction as she continued. “We have something in common.”

Lois looked again at Clark and put her arm around him as she said, “Yeah, Rachel, I guess we do.”

Rachel said, “I guess I’ll see y’all later. I need to go check on the rest of my deputies and make sure we got the entire group,” as she turned and headed for her car.

Superman turned to Jonathan and Martha and said, “I’d like to have a couple of minutes with Lois and Clark if I may.”

Jonathan nodded and then said, “Okay, Clark, we’re gonna go back into the house. You and Lois can join us when you’re through here.”

Clark said, “Thanks, Dad. We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

When the elder Kents had left, the three of them turned and strolled down the lane somewhat to get away from Cooper, Jimmy, and Wayne at the crime scene. Lois still had an arm around Clark because he was still somewhat unsteady. When they were out of earshot, Superman turned to Lois and Clark and said, “Clark, thank you for playing your part so well.”

Lois got a shocked expression as she said, “Played a part? What’s going on?”

“Clark, do you mind if I take Lois for a little flight? We’ll be right back.”

Clark, with a concerned look, asked, “Are you okay with that, Lois?”

She laughed and said, “It’s Superman! Why should I mind?”

Clark said, “Alright, as long as you’re okay with it.”

## Chapter 19 — Revelations

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 030 x Gamma 100 x Tau 185

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Superman picked Lois up and flew off. They landed at Reeves Overlook. For a couple of minutes they simply enjoyed the scenery before Superman spoke up. “Lois, Trask really was close to having a rock that could harm me. I needed someone to distract him for a while so that I could dispose of the real thing and substitute a fake. I then had to fly to Washington to meet with the Joint Chiefs. Clark volunteered to act as a decoy and delay Trask as long as he could to give me the time for that mission. Clark knew that I would be busy for a while and that he would be risking his life, but he volunteered anyway. Lois, Clark is one of the bravest men I know. Neither of us has ever told you this, but I’ve known Clark longer than you have; you see, I didn’t just appear when the Prometheus Shuttle had that problem. I’ve been

here for a while, operating in the background.”

Lois was blown away and all she could manage was a choked, “What?” Immediately her anger began to flare. Kent had been holding out on her! Well, actually, she knew that he had a secret way of contacting Superman and she knew that they talked frequently because both of them occasionally slipped and mentioned something that she had told the other. This put her partner in a new light.

Superman saw her anger flare and quickly said, “Lois, don’t be angry with Clark. He has kept this secret for me for years. He is the most honorable and loyal man I know. He has kept this secret at the peril of his own life at times. He deserves your respect.”

Superman continued, “Lois, I’m aware that you would like to get to know me better, that you have something of a crush on me. All I can say is, if you want to get to know me, I’d suggest that you get to know Clark Kent. I’m not in a position such that \*I\* can really get involved with women. You see, in a sense, I’m not real. I’m a creation, but Clark Kent is the real deal. Clark knows me better than anyone else possibly could. \*I\* may not be able to stay, but you can count on Clark.”

Taking a chance that this universe was a close parallel to Prime, he continued, “Lois, I don’t know all about your family and your past. I do know that the men in your life have hurt you.” He was really going out on a limb with the next one, he just hoped that he was correct. “There were problems with your father and others.” Seeing her response to this statement he realized that he had been correct in his assumption. In his universe he had been there and he had prevented any association between his Lois and Claude. “As I said, Clark knows me better than anyone. By the same token, I know Clark better than anyone else. Lois, I can tell you for a fact that Clark will \*never\* do anything to hurt you. He is rock steady. I never told you before, but sometimes I can see the future. Do you want to know what I see in your future?”

Lois was a little hesitant but finally she gave a nervous nod.

He said, “I see you having multiple Kerth awards.”

She responded to this statement with a smile and said, “Really? How many?”

With a chuckle, he continued, “Several, some of them are for individual effort ... but there are a number that you share ... with your partner. You’re going to be billed by the Planet as ‘The Hottest Team in Town’ and finally ... I see you happily married.”

Now she had a shocked expression. “How can that be? Won’t that interfere with my job?”

He continued, “Trust me, it won’t. But all of these things will only happen if you stay with Clark Kent. You don’t know it yet, but Clark Kent is the best thing ever to happen in your life. Clark would willingly lay down his life for you and he has protected you when I haven’t been available. My one piece of advice to you would be to not allow yourself to be distracted. There could be some distractions that you will need to avoid. Keep yourself focused on Clark.”

She gave him a speculative look and asked, “What kind of distractions?”

“In the near future you are going to be tempted to have a relationship with Lex Luthor. I would warn you against that. Talk it over with Clark and heed what he says. Work with Clark but above all, trust him. Don’t date Luthor, investigate him. There could be a Pulitzer in it.”

At the mention of a Pulitzer her eyes almost literally lit up and he heard her gasp.

Superman continued, “Be careful, Luthor is dangerous. Remember, the team of Lane and Kent will be unstoppable. You will be world famous investigative reporters.”

He went back to re-emphasize that point, “I see that the mention of a Pulitzer interested you. I am confident that as long as you and Clark stay together the ceiling is not even a limit. I’ve

probably told you more than I should have, but it was important to me to make you understand that your future lies with Clark Kent and not with me.”

Lois said, “I’ve known for a while that he likes me.”

Superman said, “Trust me, Lois, he more than likes you. Just give him a chance to prove what his feelings are. You won’t be disappointed. He is unlike any other man you have ever known. He will never desert you.”

He said, “I’ve given you a lot of food for thought. Do you have any questions?”

Lois asked, “Yeah, what makes you so sure that my future is tied to Clark’s?”

“Lois, you know that I’m not from this planet. There is something that you don’t know about me. I am something of a historian and to a certain extent a philosopher. Let me ask you a philosophical question. What is the soul?”

“Well, I wasn’t a philosophy major but everyone knows that the soul is what we are.”

He replied, “Not exactly, the soul is who we are while the memories define what we are. That’s a common mistake and not a serious one. Have you ever heard the term soul mate?”

“Well, no, should I have?”

“In ancient Greece the philosopher, Aristophanes, speculated that the original humans were created by the gods as a single being with four arms and four legs and one head with two faces. Zeus, fearing their potential power, split them in half, condemning them to spend eternity each half searching for the other half.”

Lois was mystified and asked, “What does ancient Greek mythology have to do with today’s day and age?”

Superman explained, “Some truths are universal in nature and do not depend on time and environment. Aristophanes was close. It wasn’t the physical form that was separated. It was the soul that was separated. Each individual has a soul mate out there somewhere and those individuals that are lucky enough to find theirs find contentment in their lives. Lois, I’m going to tell you something that I don’t think even Clark knows at this point. Lois, you and Clark are soul mates. Haven’t you felt different since he came into your life? Haven’t you been more relaxed and content since you two have been together?”

She mulled this over for a minute before she, with awe in her voice said, “Yes, I have. Now that I think about it, I have been more at peace with myself since he showed up.”

“Here’s another question for you to ask yourself; has Clark ever tried to make you into what he wants you to be?”

Since she had been wrong on her previous answer, she carefully considered this question before saying, with a look of wonder on her face, “No, he hasn’t. He might object to the way I want to do things sometimes. More often than I want to admit, he’s right, but he just supports me. Those must be the times you were talking about when he protects me.”

Superman finished up with, “Lois, the truth is that you and Clark are soul mates. He is the only one that can complete you and you are the only one that can complete him. He doesn’t want to make you into what he wants you to be, he wants you to be who you are. He loves you, the real you, the whole you, just the way you are. Go to him. I think you’ll find that, given half a chance, you’ll love him the way he loves you.”

Lois had a very pensive expression on her face as she took all of this in. She asked, “Are you going to tell Clark all of this?”

He replied, “No, Lois, I’m not. You can tell him, when you think the time is right. It’s enough that you know.”

She said, “Thanks, Superman. This is a lot to consider. Can you take me back now?”

“Sure thing, Lois.” He picked her up and flew her to the Kent farm, landing next to Clark who was still standing right where they had left him. Superman set Lois’ feet on the ground. As soon

as her feet hit the ground she was out of Superman's arms and in Clark's.

She turned to Superman and said, "You've given me a lot to think about. Now, Clark and I have a lot to talk about." She turned and gave Clark an unreadable look. It was a mixture of awe, hope, speculation, excitement and contentment all rolled into one. Keeping an arm around Clark, she said, "Let's go, your folks will be getting worried about us." She turned again and said, "Thanks, Superman, for everything. I won't forget."

Clark put an arm around Lois and they turned to walk away.

Superman took one last look around and flew off to do a patrol of Metropolis.

As he was approaching Metropolis he heard a radio broadcast. There was a tanker loaded with crude oil foundering off the coast of Florida. It had just taken a load from an oil rig in the Gulf when a tropical storm had hit. The storm was rather late in the season and had come up unexpectedly.

Superman changed course and made it to the Gulf before the ship was too severely damaged. It appeared as though some of the plates had sprung from the pounding of the high seas. The crew had the pumps going but it was a losing battle, she was taking water faster than they were able to pump it out. It was only a matter of time before the ship went down.

As soon as the crew saw Superman arrive, they stopped lowering the boats and headed back to their duty stations. Most of the deck hands returned to the pumps.

Superman dove underwater and examined the hull. He found the sprung plates and one by one, using his superstrength, pulled them together and then used his heat vision to weld them back together.

As soon as he had the first seam repaired, he could hear the cheer that went up from the crew. Suddenly, instead of the water level increasing, they could see it begin to drop.

Superman continued his efforts and seam by seam he restored the hull to watertight integrity. When he finished the last seam he flew up and landed on the bridge. The captain greeted him. "Superman, when you arrived we were in the process of abandoning ship. Thanks to you we won't have to."

Superman asked, "Captain, what port is your destination?"  
"We are headed for Houston."

"Captain, with your permission, I will move your vessel west until we are out of this storm. I'll be supporting your vessel so that it will not be pounded by the waves. I'll make it a smooth trip."

"Thank you, Superman. I will be notifying the owners of what has happened and recommending that this ship be put into dry dock for repairs as soon as it has been lightened."

Superman said, "That sounds like a good idea, Captain. I'm going to pick your vessel up and fly it beyond this area of disturbance. That should smooth things out some. Hang on, Captain."

Superman took off and flew down under the keel of the ship and lifted. He managed to raise the ship clear of the water and started flying. It took only a few minutes to reach an area of smoother water where he could re-float the tanker. At that point, Superman returned to the bridge. He said, "Captain, I think you'll have an easier time of it from here. I'll be leaving you now."

The captain said, "Thanks again, Superman. You not only saved this vessel, you also prevented an environmental disaster. We are carrying hundreds of thousands of barrels of crude which would have been released into the Gulf waters but for you."

Superman replied, "That's what I'm here for, Captain, to help and to serve. If your owners would like to show their appreciation, they can make a donation to the Superman Foundation. I'll be seeing you around, Captain." He slowly lifted off and headed for Metropolis.

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The night before he was scheduled to meet with Herb, Alt Superman stopped by Clark's apartment. He was surprised to find he wasn't home. He thought for a second and took off again. A few seconds later he was hovering outside the window of Lois' apartment. Lois and Clark were on her couch looking at papers that were spread out on her coffee table amidst the remains of Chinese takeout containers, obviously working on an investigation. Alt Superman knocked on the window.

Startled at the sudden sound Lois looked up and then looked at Clark and arched an eyebrow. Clark shrugged his shoulders and said, "Let him in."

Lois arose and walked over to the window and opened it. She stood back as he entered. As he landed on her floor, she said, "Superman, we weren't expecting to see you." She looked over at Clark again and said, "I haven't forgotten what you told me, but you didn't tell me ... everything ... did you?"

Curious now, Alt Superman asked, "What didn't I tell you?"  
"That you weren't \*my\* Superman."

Alt Superman looked over at local Clark. Local Clark nodded and stood up. He moved over behind Lois and put his arms around her waist from behind. She released a sigh and leaned back into his embrace.

Alt Superman said, "Ah ha, well, I guess you two don't need me around any longer." He looked at Clark and said, "I came around to say goodbye. My ride is coming tomorrow so you'll be back on duty. I'm glad that the two of you are together now. I wish you my best."

Local Clark said, "Thanks," he looked down at Lois as he finished, "for everything."

Lois added, "Yes, for everything. If it hadn't been for our talk, I might have missed the forest for seeing the trees. You were right. Clark \*is\* the best thing to ever happen to me."

Alt Superman said, "Just keep that in mind and another thing to keep in mind is the fact that together you are stronger than either of you separately. To quote a favorite character of mine. "With a deadpan expression and giving the Vulcan hand salute, he said, "Live long and prosper." Then he smiled as he said, "Goodbye." He turned and lifted off through the open window.

Epilogue

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 030 x Gamma 100 x Tau 185

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In a remote section of the Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, a portal opened in the air. Unnoticed, Herb stepped through the portal and proceeded to the area around the Tomb of the Unknowns. Arriving there, he spotted Clark, dressed in his normal GQ style business attire, and walked over to him. His arrival was timed perfectly and he walked up and greeted Clark just in time to watch the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns. Standing side by side they silently watched the very moving ceremony. When it finished Herb turned away and indicated that Clark should accompany him, so he and Clark strolled away together.

Herb asked, "Well, how did it go, my boy?"

Clark related the story of his latest mission and then finished up with, "Another success, another Lois and Clark together, another universe on the path to Utopia. Herb, how many more of these missions do I have to go on? I mean, yeah, it's rewarding saving them and bringing them together, but it's not helping me. I'm still as alone as the day Lois died."

Herb replied, "I know, my boy, I have known that this was going to be a strain on you, but it was necessary. You have performed marvelously. As anticipated, in each mission you have saved and brought together the Lois Lane and Clark Kent of that universe. The number of universes that through your direct effort

are now on the path to utopia that would not have been otherwise is significant. You have done yeoman's work, my lad. The good news is that there remains just one final mission. Can you do one more mission?"

"Yeah, I guess so, Herb. What's the situation this time?"

Herb said, "Let's continue our stroll, I have a lot to tell you. This is truly your last mission because this mission is to unite you with Lois."

Herb gave his last statement a few seconds to sink in. He was rewarded by the grin that spread on Clark's face.

Clark, still wary, asked, "Really? You have found a Lois without a Clark?"

"My boy, let's go over there and sit on that bench. We have a lot to discuss."

THE END, of this Volume

The companion story / sequel is

Clark and Lois — Hope Realized — Matchmaker Chronicles  
Volume 5

Footnotes:

Jack Benny was married to Mary Livingstone (born: Sadie (Marrix) Marks), a cousin of the Marx brothers, who was many years his junior. Knowing that he was dying, he set up a trust with a florist so that a single rose would be delivered to her daily after his death. The day after the funeral she started receiving the roses and it was a week or so before her grief at her loss lessened enough to question the source of the flowers. She then started asking questions and found out that Jack was the source. It was a testament to his love for her and the deliveries continued until her death in 1983.

<http://www.snopes.com/glurge/benny.asp>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BLEVE>