

The Time Traveler's Wife

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: A journalist who's missing in the Congo, a defective time travel machine and a lonely superhero results in an extraordinary adventure for alternate Clark. Will he obtain his heart's desire or will he destroy his world while endeavoring to do so?

This is a fanfic based on the television show, Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman. No copyright infringement is intended. I'm borrowing these characters for a little fun and not for any profit. For complete disclaimer, go to: <http://www.thompsonlawoffice.ca/Disclaimer.htm>

This story came to me while watching the movie, 'The Time Traveler's Wife.' However, other than the title and the realization that when telling a story about time travel, there is no linear progression of events, this story bears no resemblance to the movie, well other than the time traveling thing, of course [g]. The ripples in a pond explanation for how changes in the past affect the present came from the movie, 'A Sound of Thunder.'

Once again, special thanks must be given to my faithful beta readers, Carol Malo and Gerry Anklewicz. I'd be lost without them to bounce ideas off, find plot holes and grammatical errors and generally encourage me to keep writing. So thanks, gals, for indulging me once again.

I also need to thank the people on the message boards for answering my many, and often crazy, questions and making suggestions for improvements during posting. Finally, thanks to Jeanne for editing this story for the archives.

A poster for this story can be found here: <http://www.thompsonlawoffice.ca/The%20Time%20Traveler's%20Wife%202.jpg>

A second poster can be found here: <http://www.thompsonlawoffice.ca/Time%20Traveler's%20Wife%206.jpg>

Other credits and acknowledgments can be found at the end of the story.

This story takes place in the alt-Clark universe.

TEASER
'Dearly Beloved'

April 1993

To say that Lois was annoyed would be damning with faint praise. She was beyond annoyed. She was even beyond angry. She was livid.

And she was very, very late.

She pushed her way through the crowds in a rush to catch her plane. That jerk had made her late. If she didn't hurry, she would never board on time.

"Last call for GendellAir flight 5340 to Rome, Casablanca and Brazzaville. All passengers should now be on board."

The announcement coming over the P.A. system caused Lois to increase her pace. What had possessed her to stop and even listen to what he had to say? The guy was obviously a taco short of a combo platter.

"If you go to the Congo, you won't be coming home," she muttered to herself even as she skirted past a couple of women who seemed to be taking time to enjoy the view. View! Please! Like there was anything to see in the halls of the airport terminal — unless someone had an addiction for overpriced novelty items or designer water.

She switched into a jog, hoisting her carry-on bag further onto her shoulder.

She still couldn't believe she'd given that wacko the time of day. Okay, so he'd looked normal enough. And he'd seemed to know her, known that she was heading to the Congo to investigate a gun running story. She could even believe that she might be in danger. After all, the people behind this were obviously not going to be pleased to learn that she was hot on their trail. But Wacko wasn't warning her to be careful. His message was urgent, panicked, almost hysterical. He'd adamantly argued that if she made this trip, she was dead.

Not that he'd been able to give details. The who, what, when and where a complete mystery to him.

Who did he think he was, anyway? He was crazy if he thought predictions of gloom and doom were going to stop her. She hadn't won three Kerths by being careful. Playing it safe was for others. She had a story to get.

Besides, for all she knew, he was working for the people behind this plot, meant to keep her from completing her investigation. And she had taken the time to let him! Idiot! She was a complete and total idiot! And if he made her miss her plane, he was dead. She'd track him down and tear him gorgeous limb from gorgeous limb.

Was that really why she'd stopped? Had she let herself respond to a pretty face?

Letting out a frustrated growl, she pushed her way past another group of slower moving passengers as she picked up her pace to a full run. She was not about to miss this flight!

Clark stood helplessly, watching through several layers of walls and people and shops as Lois fought her way onto the plane that would seal her fate. He watched with growing horror as she arrived at the plane before digging into her carry-on to retrieve her ticket to hand it to the flight attendant.

She hadn't listened. He'd been so sure she would. If the other Lois was to be believed, this Lois was his soulmate. Surely that must mean that she would listen if he told her that she should give up this investigation, that her life was in danger. So ... why had she simply looked at him as if he'd lost his mind?

"I told you this was a fool's errand," came the older man's voice from behind.

Clark cringed. Sometimes he really hated that man. Without him, he would never have met the Lois from the alternate dimension, never have realized how empty his life was without her, never have spent the past year with a Lois-shaped hole in his heart, rescuing people like a well-trained superhero and then flying home to an empty apartment night after night.

"The past is not meant to be changed," H.G. Wells continued. "So are you ready to return?"

Clark felt fury rise in his chest. No. No, he wasn't about to admit defeat so quickly. It had taken him forever to convince Wells to bring him into the past to talk to Lois in the first place. He'd been subjected to lecture after lecture about the dangers of playing with the time line. If he let this go now, he'd never get another chance.

No. Only one choice now existed. He'd go the Congo. He'd meet Lois the instant she stepped off that plane. If she refused to return to the States, he'd glue himself to her side and make sure that whatever had happened to take her from him the first time didn't happen again.

He didn't bother looking at Wells. Instead, leaving nothing more than a rush of wind behind, he disappeared, almost literally, into thin air.

PART ONE

'From This Day Forward'

September 1987

Lois looked at the crudely drawn map before, once again, observing her surroundings. Left. She was pretty sure she had to turn left here.

She had to admit, she was excited. Her first year of university. She might be starting a year later than she had thought she would, but a serious car accident in grade ten had caused her to lose a semester of school. Still, at nineteen, it wasn't as if she was an old lady. Of course, that might change when she turned twenty later this month.

"Excuse me," a young woman said, drifting to a stop next to her. "Do you know where I can find the Ink and Quill?"

Lois looked up to see a blonde who was about her age standing before her. She had been so lost in thought that it took a moment for the woman's question to sink in.

"It's the university newspaper," the woman continued when Lois didn't respond quickly enough. "I was told it was somewhere around here."

"Uhh ... no. I don't know where it is. In fact, I was just looking for it myself." She gestured at the paper napkin in her hands. "I asked some guy in the dining hall and this is what he gave me."

The woman glanced down at the napkin. "Left ... it looks like we go left here."

Lois nodded. "That's what I thought, too."

"I'm Linda King, by the way."

"Lois Lane," Lois responded as the two women began walking down the hallway they thought should take them where they wanted to go. "So are you a journalism major, too?"

Linda nodded. "I just arrived on campus a few minutes ago. Haven't even been to the dorms yet, but I didn't want to miss orientation at the paper."

Lois smiled. A kindred spirit, obviously. "Well, I arrived yesterday so that gives me a day's advantage on you for getting my first scoop for the paper."

"No way. Once we step through the door to the paper, all bets are off. I'm going to be the best reporter the Ink and Quill has ever had."

Lois' smile widened. "We'll just have to see about that."

Linda laughed.

"Hey, I think that must be it up ahead."

The large ornate wooden doors off to one side of the corridor had a sign above it that announced to all the entrance to The Ink and Quill. Both young women stopped before the doors, as if realizing how monumental a moment this was — the moment when they left behind their high school papers and entered the world of university journalism. They grinned at each other. Then, by unspoken consent, Linda stepped up next to Lois and each, hearts pounding, grabbed the handle to one of the two doors and, after taking a moment to let the occasion sink in, pulled together, swinging the doors open to allow them to enter.

One step into the room, they both stopped dead in their tracks, paralyzed by dozens of eyes staring at them in silence. Orientation had already started and no one had missed their grande entrance.

Lois felt color rise in her cheeks and she muttered a quick apology before slinking through the crowded room to find a place near the back. Linda silently followed. Not exactly an easy task since the room was crowded. People sat on chairs, desks, counters and even the floor. Excess people crowded around the edges of the room — testimony to the fact that New Troy University had one of the best journalism programs in the country.

Lois moved gingerly through the mass of humanity trying not to step on anyone and acutely aware that every eye in the room was currently following her and Linda's progress. Since there was no place left to sit, Lois and Linda joined the other students cluttered along the back wall.

"So anyway ..." A voice breaking the silence directed the crowd's attention back to the man standing behind a make-shift podium set up on one of the desks on the far side of the room.

"... now that you all know who I am ..."

Lois had no idea who he was, but she wasn't about to ask. Still, given the man's graying hair and his poorly pressed suit, she suspected he was the paper's faculty advisor.

"... there is someone else here you need to meet. You'll probably want to suck up to him since he's the one who assigns stories, edits your work and decides what will and will not go into the paper. Unlike your high school papers, for those of you who worked on them, the faculty advisor does not make editorial decisions. I am here solely to ensure that the paper does not get sued."

In spite of the man's monotone voice, polite laughter followed this comment — more as if they felt it was expected rather than that he sold the humor of his comment.

"Everything else is the responsibility of your student editor. So ... come on up here, Paul."

A young man with slightly unruly blond hair, wearing a tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows and khaki trousers, stepped forward from where he'd been half-seated on one of the desks at the edge of the room. He had broad shoulders and an athletic build and exuded a feeling of confidence when he moved. A young man sure of his place in the world.

"Paul Benson is currently a senior majoring in journalism," the faculty advisor continued. "And this year, given his outstanding work for this paper during his time at the university, he has been offered ... and I'm pleased to say has accepted the job as editor of the Ink and Quill for the upcoming school year."

"The paper is doomed," someone called out from the side of the room where Paul had been only moments before.

Laughter followed — mostly from the small group assembled at that side of the room.

"Thanks, Bob," Paul said, glancing over at the heckler with a smile that informed the room that he and Bob were friends. Probably a fellow student who had also worked on the paper the previous year.

But Lois heard none of it. She was completely lost to everything except the classic good-looks and authority radiating off the new editor of The Ink and Quill. Unlike the high school boys she'd dated, when she took the time to be bothered dating, Paul was quite obviously a man. And given the way the blood was now pounding through her veins, she knew instantly what she was experiencing. The stash of romance novels buried in a box at the back of her closet at home talked about it often enough. That moment when a woman knows she's met the one great love of her life.

"Mmm, mmm, mmm, mmm."

Linda's voice in her ear, brought Lois back to her surroundings with a start.

"I wouldn't mind taking him for a spin around the block ... or two or three," Linda said, before a look from Lois silenced her. "What? Don't tell me you've fallen for him already?"

Lois squirmed slightly.
“Relax. He’s a senior. I’m sure he thinks of us as kids, anyway.”
“Trust me. I know just how I’ll get him to change his mind,” Lois whispered back.
She instantly regretted her words when she could see in her peripheral vision that Linda’s eyebrows had gone up.
“Not like that,” Lois hissed.
Linda choked back her spontaneous laughter, causing heads to turn in their direction. To deflect their attention, Lois and Linda both stared resolutely at the other side of the room where the faculty advisor had just finished shaking Paul’s hand and was gesturing him to take his place behind the podium.
When heads turned back towards the podium, Linda leaned closer.
“So what’s this great plan of yours?” she whispered.
“I’m going to get the best story this paper has ever seen. He won’t be able to write me off as a schoolgirl then.”
Any response Linda might have given was silenced by a couple of pointed looks from the people around them. Not that Lois minded. She didn’t intend to miss any of Paul Benson’s speech.

“The first rule of journalism is publish or perish. And to publish, we need reporters. So it’s good to see such a large number of people committed to bringing truth and justice to their fellow students,” Paul said. He then paused and glanced meaningfully at Bob. “Well, except for those of you who are just here because you’ve heard we throw the best parties on campus.”
The crowd replied with the appropriate laughter. Bob raised his cup of coffee in salute.

“For the past two years,” Paul continued, much more seriously, “the Ink and Quill has won the Krebbs award for excellence in university journalism — the Krebbs Award was established by Old Man Krebbs, the former editor at the Daily Planet, to encourage quality reporting in university papers. It’s an honor we take very seriously. That means we only print the best stories. So for those of you majoring in journalism who are required to have a certain number of stories published in the university paper ... Not my problem. You submit good work and you’ll get published. If not ...” He shrugged.

He continued speaking and Lois hung on every word, mesmerized not only by the content of the speech, but by the tone of his voice, the way he used his hands when he spoke and the slight lilt of his head when he would pause briefly. Bringing truth and justice to her fellow students. Not only was he good looking, charismatic, intelligent and funny, he was also an idealist. Could this man be any more wonderful?

April 1993

Where was she? He couldn’t have missed her — could he? Not with his extra advantages.

Still, she was not there. Clark had arrived in Brazzaville in plenty of time, watched her plane land, and then waited just outside customs. He hadn’t turned his back for a minute.

Lowering his glasses, he began to systematically look, scanning the entire airport with his eyes and hearing, alert for any sign of her. The place was a madhouse of activity. Everyone pushing, shoving, talking. Soldiers carrying guns and looking menacing. Crowds pushing their way towards destinations. Families reunited. Families saying goodbye.

Clark pushed all that aside to concentrate. One woman. All he needed to do was find one woman.

Nothing.

“I suspected I’d find you here.” Wells pulled out a hanky and began wiping the sweat off his brow. “Hot day here, I say.”

“Where is she?” Clark demanded, spinning around to glare at the little man behind him.

“She’s not here?” Wells asked, even as he instantly began looking around as if expecting her to appear at any moment. “Are you sure she’s not still on the plane?”

Clark rolled his eyes, even while Wells ignored him to continue looking around the terminal.

“I assume,” Wells continued after a moment, “that she didn’t for some reason get off somewhere else along the way.”

“Wha ... Somewhere else along the way?”

Wells did turn back towards him then. “Or was it a direct flight?”

Clark stared at Wells in growing disbelief. He’d seen Lois board the flight in Metropolis and then, after hiding out from Wells until the time her flight was scheduled to land in Brazzaville, he’d come here, waiting for her to get off the flight. It hadn’t even occurred to him that it might not have been a direct flight. A moment later, he was pushing through the crowds to get to the counter.

“Excuse me,” he asked the woman behind the counter, giving her the best smile he could under the circumstances. After all, he knew the assistance he got from women increased exponentially when he smiled.

The woman glanced up from the computer screen in front of her and then, giving him her full attention, smiled back. “Can I help you?” the woman asked in heavily accented English.

“Can you tell me ...” Clark began, sticking with English since it appeared to be quicker than determining which of the Congo’s many languages the woman spoke. “The plane that just arrived from Metropolis ... Did it land anywhere along the way?”

She glanced back at her screen. “Yes. It refuel in Rome and Casablanca .”

Clark suddenly felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. His hand blindly sought the edge of the counter to keep from collapsing.

“Sir?” the woman asked, concerned, but Clark waved her off as he stumbled away.

How could he have missed that? If she had disembarked in Rome or Casablanca, the trail would be hours old. But ... why would she have gotten off the plane in either of those places? Still, there was no point in standing here, wondering about the reasons, when he could be searching Rome or Casablanca for her. A moment later Clark Kent was no longer in Brazzaville.

September 1987

Lois pushed open the door to her room and stepped out into the hall. All done. She’d put the finishing touches on her dorm room, the place that would serve as her home for the upcoming year. She was just about to head out when she caught sight of someone stepping through the stairwell door, her face obscured by piles of boxes as she staggered blindly down the hall.

Rushing forward, Lois grabbed the top boxes as they started to topple. “Here, let me,” she said, removing the top of the other girl’s burden.

“Lois?”

Lois glanced up from where she was ensuring she had a grip on the boxes, surprised, at the sound of her name. “Linda?” she gasped.

Linda laughed. “Are you in this dorm, too?”

Lois nodded as the two young women began walking down the hall. “Which room are you in?”

“Two ten.”

“Really? I’m in two thirteen.”

“We’re neighbors, then,” Linda said.

“I guess so.” Lois stopped in front of room two ten. “This is it.”

“Home, sweet home,” Linda responded before, with a sigh, setting her boxes down so that she could dig in her pocket for her key.

"Mark Harmon from St. Elsewhere ... and John F. Kennedy Jr?" Lois said as she rolled out the posters before handing them, one at a time to Linda so that she could attach them to her wall.

"Well," Linda responded, "you've got to admit that Mark is an absolute hunk and John John ... Well, I couldn't very well not put up a poster of my future husband."

"You plan on marrying John John?" Lois asked in amusement.

"Absolutely."

"Do you even know him?"

"Not yet, but after I graduate, I'm going to move to Washington and cover politics. I'll interview John John. He'll fall hopelessly in love with me and ... " She turned towards Lois, holding out her hands. "You are looking at the future first lady of the United States of America."

Lois laughed. "John John's not even interested in going into politics."

"That's what he says now."

"And what? You're going to change his mind?"

"Hey, there's nothing to change. He's a Kennedy. Of course he's going into politics."

"And he's going to win when he runs for President?"

"Of course he's going to win. All we have to do is pull out that picture of him saluting his father's coffin and every woman in America will be running to the polls to vote for him. And since there are more women than men in the country ... It will be a landslide."

Lois laughed again. "Glad to see you have it all worked out."

"Well, not all of it. I still can't figure out what I'm going to wear when I interview him." She winked at Lois. "And, hey ... " Linda continued after a brief pause. " ... don't tell me you don't have any pictures of celebrities up in your room because I won't believe you. Now let's see ... " She paused in her task of hanging John John's picture to look at Lois, sizing her up. "Martin Luther King, Jr."

Lois blushed.

"I knew it!"

"Well, not King, but ... Well, I do have a photo of Ghandi and ... a signed poster from the Daily Planet promotional of their reporting team of Norcross and Judd."

"You've got a poster signed by Billy Norcross and Serena Judd?" Linda asked, her eyes going wide in appreciation.

"They're only the greatest reporting team since Woodward and Bernstein! Have you met them?"

Lois nodded. "When I was working for my high school paper, we took a trip to the Daily Planet. I managed to sneak away from the group. Billy Norcross caught me. Of course, it wasn't too difficult since I froze as soon as I spotted them — unable to look away."

"What were they doing?" Linda asked in awe.

"Batting ideas back and forth on their latest story. I've never seen anything like it. They even completed each other's sentences! It was like this well rehearsed act. It was amazing."

"So what happened then?" Linda asked, completely enthralled by the story.

"Billy Norcross returned me to the group. I talked the whole time. Not sure exactly what I said, but I was just so ... you know."

"I would have been, too."

"Anyway, I think he must have realized that I was a fan so as we were leaving after our tour, he approached me and handed me one of the Daily Planet's promotional posters. When I got it home, I realized that he and Serena Judd had actually signed it!"

"I've got to see that poster," Linda said, jumping down from where she was situated on her bed to hang her poster of John John.

"What about your room?"

"I'll finish unpacking after I see your poster."

Lois smiled and rose to her feet to accompany Linda across the hall. They had just reached the door to Lois' room when they were stopped by the sound of a man yelling for someone to wait.

When they looked around, a young man was approaching. He looked somewhat familiar to Lois, but she couldn't quite place him.

"Linda and ... Lois, right?"

"Actually, I'm Linda and she's Lois," Linda said when he mixed up the names.

"Right, right. We haven't actually been introduced, but ... "

"You were at the orientation for the Ink and Quill," Lois said when it finally occurred to her why he looked so familiar. "Bob, right? You gave Paul a hard time."

She could see Linda's confused expression clear.

"Bob Stafford," Bob said. "Listen, Paul sent me to find you."

Linda and Lois looked at each other. "Which one?"

"Either. Are either of you pledging a sorority?"

"I am," Lois said, cringing slightly at the admission. To Linda's raised eyebrows, she continued. "My mother sort of guilted me into it."

"Which sorority?" Linda asked.

"Alpha Nu Rho. It was her sorority. Besides, I hear the alumni makes sure it always has the latest computer equipment so I guess it's not all bad."

"What about you?" Bob asked, turning to Linda.

"I'm pledging Alpha Nu Rho, too."

"Damn. Oh well. I should have known it couldn't be that easy." He turned to leave.

"Wait! Why were you asking?"

"Paul is looking for someone to cover the sororities for pledge week for the Ink and Quill and ... "

"I'll do it," Lois interrupted.

"Why should you get to do it?" Linda asked.

"Because I volunteered first."

"Actually, neither of you can do it," Bob interrupted before Linda could respond.

"Why?" both women asked in unison, their gazes returning to Bob.

"Because if you're pledging, you can't be impartial. And Paul is looking for someone impartial to cover pledge week."

Both women suddenly looked despondent.

"Hey, don't worry. I'm sure they'll be other stories." He was about to turn to go when Linda's voice stopped him.

"Listen, Bob, what exactly is your position at the paper? Well, other than running Paul's errands."

"I do not run Paul's errands," Bob said, more than a touch of annoyance in his voice. "I write a science column for the paper. I'm doing a double major in physics and chemistry. And I saw a need for someone who actually knew what he was talking about to take over the science column. You should have seen some of the junk the last science editor let into the paper. You journalist types have no idea how to distinguish good science from science fiction."

"And being such a brain yourself ... unlike us poor simpletons ... well, and a man, I suppose ... " Lois paused briefly, letting her eyes take in the man in front of her, as if not quite sure of her assessment of him as a man. "I guess covering pledge week for the women's sororities would be beneath you," Lois said, fighting to keep a straight face when she heard Linda give a small snort which she covered quickly with a cough.

"As a matter of fact, it would be. But I don't have time either."

"Too many cultures that would miss daddy?" Lois asked, ignoring the poorly covered sounds of muffled laughter coming from Linda's direction.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I'm a member of Beta

Beta and I've got some major responsibilities in pledge week myself." Without waiting for a response, Bob turned and stormed back down the hall.

The second the door to the stairwell closed behind him, Lois and Linda dissolved into fits of laughter.

"I probably shouldn't have done that," Lois said as the laughter ended. "He just made me so mad with his comment about journalists." She turned towards the door to her room, pulling out her key to unlock it.

"Well, he won't make that mistake again," Linda responded, following Lois into her room. "So where's this ... Oooo ... " She rushed over to the Daily Planet poster, close enough to read the inscription. "To Lois. When you become a journalist, may you be lucky enough to be partnered with your best friend, too. Billy Norcross and Serena Judd." Linda looked in awe for a moment before turning to Lois. "Best friends, huh? I heard there was more between them than just friendship."

"I've heard that, too."

"So ... ?"

Lois shrugged. "No idea."

Linda made herself comfortable on Lois' bed and glanced around. "Nice," she said.

"Thanks," Lois responded. "I have to admit, I love these rooms. No roommates. Our own bathrooms."

"The kitchen areas are a little small."

Lois shrugged. "Yeah, but it will be nice to be able to sit at a table ... even if it is kinda small ... to drink my coffee in the morning. And I love this chair." With that, she lovingly stroked the arm on the large, if somewhat thread-bare chair on which she was sitting.

"Uhhh ... the things that money can buy." Linda smiled. "So what's your story?"

"My story?"

"Folks still together?"

Lois nodded. "My dad's a surgeon. My mother likes to refer to herself as his faithful nurse."

"They work together?"

Lois nodded. "They often weren't home when my sister and I got home from school. But the housekeeper was always there to make sure we didn't get in too much trouble. Even when they were home, they spent most of their time together in the lab my father set up in the house. They have come up with some interesting inventions though which they've managed to get patented and it taught my sister and me self-reliance so it wasn't bad. And ... " A small smile twisted her lips for a moment. " ... it led to some ... interesting experiences." To Linda's look of intrigue, Lois added, "I'll tell you about it sometime." Then she changed the subject. "What about you? What's your story? Your parents still together?"

"Hell, no. Mom has had two ... no three marriages since my dad."

"Is that hard?"

"It has its compensations," Linda said smugly, rolling onto her side on Lois' bed, hand propping up her head. "Mommy has a talent for attracting rich men ... and a lawyer who knows best how to take advantage of that during the divorce. Not only that, but she and Daddy are constantly trying to outdo each other with their gifts to me. Clothes. Shoes. Trips. Cars. Whatever I wanted, really. In fact, that computer you're coveting at Alpha Nu Rho ... I've got one of my own back home. Didn't bring it with me because ... Well, it was fun to play with when I first got it, but I don't think there's much of a future for computers. I learned a lot about how they work, but after that ... " She shrugged. "You can play games on computers, of course. But I can think of a lot of things that are much more fun to play with — guys, for example." She wiggled her eyebrows at Lois.

Lois shook her head, not entirely sure if she believed Linda's

casual manner when referring to her unconventional family life.

"What about using your computer for writing stories? Isn't it useful for that?"

"The word processor?"

Lois nodded.

"I prefer using a pen and paper." Linda shrugged. "I'm a good speller and a lousy typist."

"Any brothers or sisters?" Lois asked, bringing them back to the topic of family.

"Two half brothers. Both younger. A step-sister and a step-brother. Both older. So what about you? Your sister younger or older?"

"Lucy's younger."

"So what did you mean about your mother guiltling you into pledging Alpha Nu Rho?"

Lois shrugged. "I got a scholarship to pay my tuition and board. But I wanted my own room."

"So in exchange for an upgrade, she nagged at you to pledge with her sorority?"

Lois nodded. "Daddy didn't care. He was more concerned about my major."

"What's wrong with your major?"

"He wanted me to be a doctor. I think he's gotten over that dream. Mother had something to do with that, too."

"So how could you deny her when she wanted you to pledge her sorority?"

"Pretty much. What about you? Why do you want to pledge Alpha Nu Rho?"

"They party with the guys from Beta Beta."

"The fraternity that our good friend Bob belongs to?"

"They say Beta Beta only take the best looking guys."

"They took Bob."

Linda laughed. "Well, Bob might be a bit of a jerk, but even you have to admit he looks pretty awesome."

"Do you ever think about anything but guys?"

"What else could possibly be worth thinking about?"

"You're hopeless," Lois laughed. "Besides, who needs fraternity guys when there's Paul."

"Now who has a one track mind?"

A short time later, Linda returned to her room to finish her unpacking. This time, Lois didn't join her. She was still reeling slightly from Linda's description of her family and was suddenly thankful for her own childhood and her parents', sometimes turbulent, but always solid, marriage. As she settled back onto her bed, her mind drifted back to one incident in particular and a small smile settled on her face as the adventure of a nine year old child came to mind.

September 1976

Lois walked over to the television and turned it off. Her favorite show, Batman and Robin, had been cancelled today so that they could show some stupid sports event. Really! She should write a letter to the station and inform them exactly how rude it was to replace her favorite show with something as trivial as sports.

Not that writing them would do any good. She hadn't even received a response to her last letter which had clearly informed them that since Robin was also a girl's name, they should replace the boy currently playing that role with a girl. Having a male/female team saving the world on a weekly basis would be so much more fun to watch. It would, of course, make more sense if the most important character was a woman. And the person named first was always the most important character. That character was the one making the majority of the decisions and boys were dumb so having a girl in that role made more sense. But she'd settle for Robin as a woman. After all, Batwoman sounded funny. Of course, if they really wanted to do it right,

they could call the show Robin and Batman.

With a heavy sigh, she walked over to the window and stared outside. Now that her show was not coming on, what should she do with her afternoon? Lucy was having a nap. Mrs. Walker, the housekeeper, was busy in another part of the house. Her folks were still at work.

As she stood there, she saw a van pull to a stop further along the street. Two men jumped out, dressed totally in black.

Lois leaned closer to the window. They were some distance away which made it hard to see them clearly, but everything about those men screamed ‘mobsters’ to Lois. So what were mobsters doing here? It must be something nasty. That was what mobsters did, after all. She ducked behind a curtain when one of them glanced in her direction — no doubt checking for witnesses.

Summoning up her courage, she glanced around the curtain in time to see one of them pull open the back doors of the van. He reached in and handed something to the other man. The sunlight reflecting off the object kept Lois from seeing it at first, but once she did, she gasped. Shovels. What did they need shovels for?

Her question was answered a moment later when she saw the two men, working together, pull a long, black bag out of the back.

A body! They were disposing of a body! What other explanation could there be?

So what should she do? She had to do something. Maybe she should go get Mrs. Walker. No. Mrs. Walker wouldn't have a clue what to do.

Maybe she should call the police, except that by the time they arrived, the body would be disposed of and the mobsters would be long gone.

Suddenly, an idea struck. What she needed was evidence — something that would allow the police to find and identify the men when she did call them.

She grabbed a chair and dragged it over to the closet, reaching up to remove Daddy's new Polaroid camera. Instant pictures. She wasn't supposed to use it without her mother or father, but this was an emergency. She clicked the button to expand the camera from its collapsible position and prepare it to take pictures.

Rushing back to the window, she raised the camera and snapped a picture, but ... Wait a minute! She was too late. A picture of the van would be helpful but the men and the body were gone. But where ... Wait!

She caught a flash of movement coming from the path that led down to Hobb's River. That must be where they had gone. The river shore. Okay, well the shovels were gone, too. So they would have to dig a hole. That should give her plenty of time to sneak down, take her pictures of them burying the body and get back here to call the police. Dropping the photo of the van on the couch, she ran to the door to pull on her shoes.

The adrenalin pumping through her system gave her an extra boost of speed and courage as she ran down the familiar path towards the shore of the river, the camera dangling around her neck. Hearing voices up ahead, she came to an abrupt halt. They weren't far now. If she continued on this path, they were sure to see her.

Thinking quickly, she darted into the woods. There was a tree that jutted out sideways over the river. If she climbed out on that, surely she could get her photos without being spotted. The leaves on the tree were more than sufficient cover. She would just have to be careful not to fall. That would surely be the death of her because she would most certainly attract the attention of the mobsters and end by sharing a grave with the person who was currently being carted around in that black bag.

Leaving the camera around her neck to ensure she didn't drop it — Daddy would kill her if it did — she carefully climbed out onto the tree trunk that grew almost parallel to the ground.

Slowly. Ever so slowly, she maneuvered herself around branches until she was finally in position. Lying down along the trunk, she reached out to push the branches aside.

She knew it! There they were. Digging a hole. The long, black body-bag stretched out next to them. The victim must have been a tall man.

Fumbling slightly, she grabbed the camera and, one hand on the camera, the other pushing a branch aside, she tried to snap a picture. Realizing she was holding the camera wrong to push the button, she let go of the branch and readjusted her grip on the camera. Once she was satisfied that she was ready, she reached out to grab the branch again.

Her hand missed. She let out a shriek as she lost her balance and plunged head first towards the ground, still grasping the camera as if her life depended on it. Irrelevantly, just before she hit the ground and everything went dark, the hum from the camera informed her that she had taken a picture. She wondered if her father would be mad about the waste of film like he had been when she and Lucy got carried away during a recent family trip to the zoo.

“That's Lois Lane. Come on, bring her over here.”

Lois' hearing was the first thing to click in, noting in confusion what sounded like a crowd of people as she was jostled in the arms of ... someone. She attempted to open her eyes, but shut them instantly with a small whimper when the bright sunlight caused pain to slice through her head.

“What happened?”

Mrs. Walters. Lois knew that voice, even if she wasn't sure she'd ever heard the woman sound quite so upset — not even when Lois had killed all her geraniums by dumping too much fertilizer and water on them. Who knew you could kill a plant by giving it too much food and water?

“She fell out of a tree,” the man holding her said. “Down by the river.”

“What was she doing by the river?” Mrs Walters asked before seeming to decide that the question was irrelevant because she continued without giving anyone a chance to respond. “Quick. Bring her inside. I'll call her father. He's a doctor. He'll know what to do.”

Lois wanted to tell them not to bother calling Daddy. She knew what they needed to do: they needed to stop jostling her around because suddenly she felt very sick to her stomach. She opened her mouth to tell them to stop but before she could, she threw up.

Panic seemed to follow her actions. Voices began talking over each other. Was the whole neighborhood here? She just wished they'd all shut up and leave her alone.

Time had no meaning. And she wasn't sure how long it was before she heard the comforting sound of her father's voice.

“Princess, can you hear me?”

She cringed. “Don't yell, Daddy. I didn't mean to take that picture. It was an accident.”

“Okay,” he whispered, sounding relieved.

Had he really thought she'd want to take a picture of falling? And was it really okay now that he knew it was an accident? Adults sometimes really confused her.

“Can you open your eyes for me?” he asked, using that same soft voice.

She screwed up her courage, expecting the same sharp pain as before, and opened her eyes. She was relieved to realize that the room was in shadows. Someone had obviously thought to draw the curtains. She glanced around. It seemed that most of the people had cleared out. But she could see their neighbor, Ms. Bellcanto, hovering near the door. Her mother was sitting on the foot of the couch and her dad was squatting beside her. Lucy was curled up on a nearby chair. She could see Mrs. Walters puttering

nervously in the background. Then her eyes focused on the shadow standing against the wall.

"That's him!" she gasped, pointing. "He was one of the people burying the body."

Her father glanced over to where she was pointing.

"He's the one who carried you up here," her father corrected.

Lois shook her head vigorously, regretting the action almost immediately. "He's a mobster and he and his friend were burying a body down by the river. He ..." Her voice trailed off in confusion when the shadow stepped away from the wall and she could see him clearly for the first time. Yes, he was dressed in black. But he was no man. He was a high school boy. So what ...

"I'm Greg. Dick and I were digging a fire pit for a party a bunch of us are having tonight on the river bank when we saw you fall out of the tree. Or ... actually, when we heard you hit the ground. We assumed you'd fallen because of the broken branches. Anyway, we brought you up to the street and started yelling. Your neighbor came out and told us to bring you here."

Lois eyed him warily. "So what was in the black bag?"

"A tent," Greg responded. "Anyway, I've got to get back and help Dick finish up. I'm glad you're okay." He nodded once to Lois before turning towards the door.

A tent? A fire pit? But she had been so sure it was a body.

"Is she going to be okay?" her mother asked nervously as Greg walked out the door.

"I think she's got a bit of a concussion. I should take her down to the clinic. We can get an x-ray done there and it's a lot closer than going to Met General. But she should be fine."

With that pronouncement, the room seemed to come alive once again as everyone hurried off to tend to their own lives and matters.

Lois relaxed back into the sofa. Okay, so she'd been wrong ... this time. No mobsters trying to dispose of dead bodies. But she had to admit, it had been exciting. Following a lead. Matching life and death with the bad guys. Trying to get the evidence. In fact, she just might want to find a way to do that when she grew up. If only there was a job that would combine that with her love of writing ... Now that would be a job worth doing.

September 1987

Lois smiled. She hadn't known it then, but that was the moment her life had changed forever. That was the moment that had brought her here today. That was the moment that she had become an investigative reporter.

June 1997

Clark felt completely drained. He'd searched both Rome and Casablanca for hours, but there had been no sign of Lois. It was as if she'd disappeared into thin air. He'd had no choice but to finally admit defeat and return to the time machine with a relieved looking Herbert George Wells.

The machine had barely re-materialized in Clark's apartment, before Clark was out of it, plopping down onto the sofa in defeat. The sofa was pushed against the wall, as was all the furniture in his apartment to accommodate the awkward machine, but Clark didn't care. The sofa was soft and comfortable. That was all he knew. His arm flung half over his face, he didn't see Wells disembark the machine. However, some instinct told him that Wells was watching him.

"What?" Clark asked morosely.

"You do understand, don't you, my boy?"

Clark didn't respond. Instead, he merely let out a breath, wishing the older man would just go away.

"No one knows exactly how changing the past would affect the present, since it's never been done before," Wells said, completely oblivious to how much Clark didn't want to hear him. "And I strongly advise that we don't want to be the ones to find

out. One theory, of course, is that any change to the past would be like throwing a rock into a pond. The ripples would start there and ripple forward in time, making changes as they went. You would have no control over how those changes would affect your own time. It could even threaten your own existence. Other theories suggest that even the smallest change in time would be like a nuclear explosion, simply obliterating your entire world.

"Now I know how much you wanted to save Lois. I understand that. But think about it. If Lois had been around the past four years, can you honestly say that the present would be the same? She would have been fighting corruption. She could do nothing else. And although that might seem like it could only make the world better, there is no way to know that."

"And how could it possibly make the world any worse?"

Clark asked, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"Let me give you a hypothetical. Let's say during the four years since her disappearance, Lois had decided to investigate Senator Heston and she found out say ... that Heston was taking bribes in exchange for granting government contracts to specific individuals and she exposed it to the world."

"That would hardly be Lois' fault."

"Of course not. But Senator Heston is now ..."

"... the President of the United States ..." Clark said.

"Exactly! The President of the United States. So if Lois had exposed Heston for some hypothetical corruption before he ran for President, and as a result, Heston had never become President, the question would be: who is the current President? And what if that President made different choices and as a result of those choices, the world was now involved in a nuclear war? As I said, any change could have catastrophic effects. And the further back in time one were to go, the greater the chance that even a small change could have catastrophic consequences."

"But four years. Surely the chances that things would be better if Lois survived are far greater than that of something catastrophic happening," Clark argued back.

"You can't ... Let me rephrase that. I won't be party to letting you find out. I'm sorry, my boy. I know how much you are hurting. But this isn't right. This isn't the way to fix your life." He climbed back aboard his time machine. "I am so sorry I wasn't able to find Lois Lane for you — that she didn't somehow survive her trip to the Congo and was just lost. And I do wish you the best of luck," Wells said before dissolving into mass of brightly colored pixels.

Clark stared at the spot where Wells' time machine had sat only a moment before, unconsciously willing him back. Suddenly, he caught sight of something lying on the floor where the machine had been located. A large, folded paper. Curiosity getting the better of him, he rose to his feet and walked over to retrieve the item. Unfolding it, he stared at it for a long moment before understanding what he was seeing.

Hope rose in his chest only to be crushed almost as quickly by Wells' dire predictions. No. Wells was right. It would be highly irresponsible of him to change the past — even if he now had the blue prints for Wells' time machine.

He gripped the paper his hands, preparing to tear it to shreds. After all, that was the responsible thing to do. Destroy it. Remove the temptation all together. Tear it into so many pieces that even he could never return to its original state. Maybe followed by a blast of heat vision.

Stepping over to his bookshelf, he took the paper and, after folding it once more, shoved it inside an old copy of H.G. Wells' Time Machine, before shoving the book back onto the shelf. After all, wouldn't it be better to keep it just in case he might have dire need of a time machine in the future?

November 1987

Lois leaned back in her chair and smiled as she allowed

herself to reread the words on the monitor. It had taken two and a half months, but she'd finally done it. She'd finally broken the biggest story the Ink and Quill had ever seen — guaranteed to have the entire campus in an uproar when the paper came out tomorrow.

Still ... she frowned slightly at the screen. It was missing ... something. But what? She snapped her fingers when it finally hit her. The personal touch.

She had the facts, all carefully backed up by copies of account ledgers taken from the football coach's office, a photo of a cheerleader sitting in an exam room for a course she did not attend, even a copy of a letter by a disgruntled cheerleader to the coach stating that she no longer felt comfortable writing exams for one of the football players and a half finished letter from the coach reminding her that he could ruin her if she refused her continued cooperation. Lois had even found a complete list of all the players who were receiving 'special educational assistance', a euphemism the coach had coined to identify players in need of assistance. Yep, breaking into Coach Black's office had provided Lois with a goldmine of evidence.

The original tip had come from Joe Malloy. The quarterback of Lois' high school football team — and sometime boyfriend. Oh, not that they had ever been serious. Debbie had been the great love of his life. Still, whenever he and Debbie broke up, he'd come to Lois for comfort. Not that she'd exactly provided 'comfort' — or at least not in the way that Debbie undoubtedly feared. No. She and Joe were friends. They'd go out, share some basically innocent kisses, and then Joe would go back to Debbie.

Not that Lois minded. She'd been far too busy to date anyway. But Joe had been a nice distraction from time to time.

Joe had graduated the same time as Lois — and had also ended up at New Troy University. He'd spent most of the year sitting on the bench, being a freshman and all. But when he'd gotten wind of a rumor of the cheerleaders writing exams for some of the star players, he'd immediately passed the information on to Lois.

He was a good friend.

Still, he wasn't who she needed to elevate this story from excellent to exceptional. No, what she needed was a personal confession. But who ... Lois had approached the disgruntled cheerleader who had written the coach, but the young woman had run in horror in the opposite direction. So who else might be willing to ...

Lois suddenly sat up straight. Hadn't she heard recently that Catherine Grant, one of the cheerleaders in question, had recently had a miserable breakup with the star quarterback of the New Troy Devils — Donald Landover. Apparently, she'd caught him in bed with another woman. Perhaps ...

Without completing her thought, Lois grabbed the phone book for the University Campus. A few moments later, she was dialing the phone.

Having placed her call, Lois hung up the phone with a smile. It seemed Catherine Grant, or Cat as she'd just informed Lois she liked to be called, was prepared to meet with her at The Outpost, a popular hangout among the athletes. Of course, Lois hadn't said exactly what she wanted to talk to Cat about, just that Lois thought Cat might like a chance to get her own back after what Landover had done to her. Cat had definitely been intrigued.

Of course, that would make it tight getting the story into tomorrow's weekly paper. All submissions had to be in by nine a.m tomorrow morning. But that still left her ... almost twelve hours. And so ... it was worth taking the time to make this earth-shattering story even better.

"Hey, what are you doing in here?"

Lois quickly saved her story, closed the file and began shut down procedures on the computer before turning to look at the young woman who had entered the study at the Alpha Nu Rho

sorority house.

"Hi, Linda," Lois said.

"Don't 'hi' me," Linda said. "Is this where you've been hiding out the past few days? Russell told me what you did."

"Russell?" Lois asked distractedly.

Linda rolled her eyes. "Russell More! My step-brother. You know, the one who's had a crush on you since you came over to my place for supper last month! The one I set you up on a date with! He told me you called and cancelled."

"Oh, that. Right. Well, something came up."

"Again?" Linda let out a breath. "At least tell me you have a date for the party tomorrow night."

"Not yet."

"You can't keep showing up stag to these things — when you even bother showing up, that is. Hey, I know! Why don't you ask Bob?"

Lois growled. During the passage of time since their initial meeting, the relationship between her and Bob Stafford had not improved — a point Linda liked to rub in as often as possible, usually along with an admonition that when trying to win a man it was not wise to alienate his best friend. And since, for reasons that completely evaded Lois, Paul and Bob were friends ... "Bite my ..."

"Of course, Bob might not be available," Linda rushed to continue, cutting Lois off.

That got Lois' attention. "You mean he actually got a girl to go out with him?" she asked in disbelief. "We're talking about a real live girl here? Not one of those blow up dolls?"

"Rumor has it. Carol something or other. Another science geek. Bob and Carol ..." Linda paused for a moment. "Actually, it sort of has a nice ring to it, doesn't it? Anyway, you'd know about Bob's new girlfriend if you ever bothered to be social."

Lois concentrated on gathering her stuff together, stuffing the documents in a file folder. "Look, Linda, I appreciate your efforts to get me to go out more, but, really, it's not necessary. I'm too busy. Of course, that could change."

Linda's eyebrows knitted together. "Wha ... " Suddenly what Lois was saying hit her. "Lois, give it up. Paul doesn't even remember your name. It's 'hey, you.' Or if he does make an effort it's ... well, whatever name comes to mind at the moment he needs you to do something."

"That's not true! He knows my name and you know that! In fact, he's been quite friendly lately."

"Okay, maybe. But friendly is a long way from his 'one true love.' He just doesn't see you that way, so unless you've got some sure-fire way to get his attention, give it up."

A mysterious grin suddenly settled onto Lois' face.

"What?" Linda asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," Lois said, trying to avoid her friend's eyes. She rose to her feet. "I'm sorry, Linda. I'm in a bit of a rush. If you don't mind ... We can talk later." Without waiting for a reply, Lois grabbed her jacket and turned towards the door. She needed to stop by her room at the dorm before meeting with the cheerleader so that she could drop off her file on the story. After all, she didn't want to risk misplacing all her evidence.

Linda watched her go before turning to stare at the computer, deep in thought.

June 1997

The screams of terror. Screeching metal crunching in on itself. The high-pitched squeal of steel on steel. Whimpering cries. Pleading with deities. Howls and whines and whimpers. The last gasps of the dying.

Clark was off the couch, dressed in the Superman suit and flying through the window of his apartment almost before he realized he was moving. He streaked across the night sky, throwing his entire being into getting to his destination as fast as

possible.

Twisted metal. Blood. Severed limbs. Crushed bodies.

Two passenger trains had collided head on. How it had happened, Clark had no idea. But there was no time to worry about the cause as he rushed from emergency to emergency. Making decisions in the blink of an eye that would save one person while another died. Never knowing if he could have, somehow, saved both — if only he'd made a different decision.

Eery shadows were cast as fires grew in intensity. There wasn't time for Clark to worry about any that didn't threaten human life. The distant wail of emergency vehicles. The soft weeping and occasional cry from the injured and dying. The sickly-sweet smell of burned flesh mixed with gasoline and burned ash. The blank eyes of the survivors.

The battle went on through the night. Emergency workers arrived, lightening Clark's load. But the bulk of the burden remained squarely on his shoulders.

The sun was beginning to rise by the time he stepped, dirt, sweat and blood coating every inch of his body, through the door to his apartment. He would not be going to work today. No one would expect him. The single benefit of everyone knowing he was Superman.

Stripping out of his suit, his eyes mostly closed with exhaustion, he stepped into the shower and turned the water on as hot as he could. As the burning stream flowed over his body, he sank to the bottom of the stall, buried his head in his hands and wept.

November 1987

Lois rushed into the study at her sorority, her eyes sparkling, her heart pounding, a smile threatening to split her face wide open. She'd done it. She'd gotten Cat Grant to spill her guts.

Cat was everything Lois had expected. A strawberry-blonde bimchette with hair that practically filled the room. She had to have some brains hidden somewhere beneath all that hair, otherwise she'd have hardly been writing exams for the quarterback. Still, Lois found it hard to warm up to a woman who worked so hard at turning being an airhead into a virtue.

The best part of interviewing Cat was that Lois had gotten her to implicate not only Donald Landover, the star of the New Troy Devils, but at least a dozen other players. And ... best of all, Cat had actually told stories of cheerleaders who had attempted to get out of the scam only to be threatened, and in one case where the young woman had persisted, how Coach Black had managed to get her kicked out of university. That single act had silenced all further discontent. Heads were definitely going to role. And ...

"... I got the whole thing on tape," she sang to the empty room, holding up her recorder in triumph. Now, all that remained was to add the information she'd obtained from Cat to her story and she'd have the story that would not only mark her as an A1 journalist and stir up all kinds of hell around the university, but would also gain her the attention of her one great love.

She didn't even bother sitting down before firing up the computer — not sure that she'd ever known such a high.

"It's better than booze. Better than a perfect report card. Better than ... sex!" she exclaimed. Then, dropping into the chair in front of the computer, she added, "Not that I'd actually know about the last one." She giggled as she watched the computer power up. "But that might change soon." She quickly glanced around, relieved that she was still as alone as she thought she was. Still, it was only a matter of time now before Paul realized what she had known since the moment she'd first laid eyes on him — that they were meant to be together.

She quickly began typing commands into the computer, impatient to finish her story. A few minutes later, she was staring at the monitor in confusion, the bubble of her high slowly deflating.

Molly Flynn woke disoriented to the sound of someone pounding loudly on the door to her room. At the end of her second year of university, she'd been invited to move into the sorority house — and she loved it. Loved the camaraderie of the girls. Loved the parties and social functions. Now that she was in her third year, and one of the leaders of the sorority, she loved it even more.

Sure, learning the ins and outs of computers was stimulating, but even more so, she loved her life as a sorority sister, and all of her free time went into making Alpha Nu Rho the best sorority on campus. Computers might be her major, but she was beginning to have second thoughts about the technological revolution. Technology seemed, more and more, to be separating people from each other — and Molly found that disturbing.

Not that she'd expressed these growing concerns to anyone. After all, they'd have thought her nuts — especially with everyone clamoring to own VCRs and computers and all the other latest gadgets. She was in on the ground floor of what promised to be a very lucrative career. In fact, even with most of this year and all of another to get her four year degree, she'd already been approached by a man Molly believed was a real up-and-comer, a Steve ... oh, what was his last name again? Steve ... Spartan! That was it. She knew it was some kind of apple. He'd made her an almost unbelievable job offer. She'd put him off, not entirely sure she wanted to work in the private sector. Maybe she could use her skills for the good of all.

Not that she'd turned him down completely, of course. He'd left his card and told her to contact him if she decided she wanted the job.

"Come on, Molly! Open up!"

Lois? That was Lois' voice, yelling at her through her closed door. But what was Lois wanting at ... She glanced at her bedside clock. ... almost two thirty in the morning?

"Hey, are you dead in there?" Lois yelled again, pounding even harder. "Come on, Mol. Open up!"

"Okay, okay," Molly yelled back. Blurry-eyed, she stumbled to her feet and slipped on her robe before opening the door.

Lois was in the room without further ado, pacing and talking a mile a minute — although exactly what she was saying wasn't quite able to penetrate Molly's sleep-clogged mind. Molly flipped on the light and closed the door.

"What are you doing?" Lois demanded. "We need to go now!"

"Go? What are you talking about? Is the place on fire or something?"

"Worse! My story's gone."

Story? What on earth ... "Okay, why don't you start from the beginning?"

"We don't have time for this," Lois insisted, grabbing Molly's hand and attempting to drag her to the door.

Molly snatched her hand away. "Well, make time. I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's ..."

"Okay, fine," Lois interrupted. "I saved my story on the computer and when I came back later tonight, it was gone. You have to help me find it. There has to be a way after all ..."

"A story ... You mean a story for the Ink and Quill? You saved it on the computer and now ..."

"It's not there! I had to make some changes to it and ..."

"Let's see if I've got this straight," Molly interrupted, holding up her hand. "You woke me up at two thirty in the morning to find a story for you? Lois, couldn't this have waited until morning? After all, it's not as if you can submit it tonight."

"No, it can't wait until tomorrow!" Lois insisted, grabbing Molly's hand and entreating her with her eyes. "I've got to find that story. I had it fully written. I just needed to add some additional information. And it has to be submitted by nine

o'clock this morning to make it into this week's edition of the paper."

Molly stared at her sorority sister for a long moment before sighing. "Okay, well, if it's on the computer, even if you accidentally erased the header, we should still be able to retrieve it — provided, of course, that someone didn't use the computer after you and managed to overwrite your story."

Lois gave her friend a look of gratitude. "Thank you," she said softly, then shifted again into motion. "If we have to get to the computer before anyone else overwrites my story, time really is of the essence." Tightening her grip on Molly's hand, she turned towards the door.

"Well, even if they've overwritten it, I may be able to retrieve it," Molly said as allowed herself to be pulled from her room. "Not that anyone is going to be working on the computer at two thirty in the morning — or at least anyone without the last name 'Lane.'"

"What do you mean it's not there?" Lois demanded, looking intently over Molly's shoulder.

"I don't know what to tell you. Are you sure you saved it?"

"Yes, I'm sure! I saved it and shut down the computer."

"Well, it's not here now."

Lois looked over Molly's shoulder to read through the computer code that Molly had been studying, not understanding a word. "Are you sure it's not there?"

"Like I said, someone could have used the computer after you left and wrote over your story." She did some more typing.

"Yes!" she exclaimed after a moment.

"What? Did you find it?"

"No, but I think I know what happened to it. Someone did use the computer after you." She pointed to some lines of code on the screen that meant nothing to Lois.

"Who?"

Molly shook her head. "There's no way to know but there is something odd here."

"What?"

"Well, it seems that whoever it was might have purposely erased your story. 'Cause it hasn't just been overwritten once. It looks as if someone deliberately overwrote it a number of times."

"What?" Lois exclaimed.

"Can you think of anyone who might do that?"

"Quite a few people, actually. But how would they have known ... " Lois' voice trailed off, causing Molly to glance back over her shoulder.

"I've got to go," Lois said abruptly.

"Where?"

"My room!" Lois grabbed her coat, pulling it on as she continued to speak. "I left the evidence for my story there. If someone knew enough about what I was doing to erase my story, they're probably looking for the evidence, too."

Lois' last words were spoken only an instant before the door closed behind her, leaving Molly staring at a closed door. With a slight shake of her head, Molly turned her attention back to the computer. If she hurried, there might still be time to get some sleep before she had to get up for her morning class, but was it possible she could still retrieve this story?

A moment later, she shut down the computer. She wasn't sure it was even possible. And if it was, it would take a lot more time than would be helpful to Lois. Besides, it was almost three o'clock in the morning. Tomorrow, maybe. Or the day after, she'd address her mind to this quandary. Tonight she was just too tired.

June 1997

"What are you doing here, Clark?"

Clark looked around from where he'd been watching one of

the televisions play the news quietly from its position, fixed high on the wall of the newsroom. He probably should still be in bed, but every time he closed his eyes all he could see was twisted and bloody bodies, all he could smell was a sickening mixture of gas, fire and death. No. Sleeping wasn't an option, so here he was. He'd been trying to type up his account of the previous night's accident, hoping that by doing so he could purge the incident from his mind, and instead had found himself caught up in the television coverage of the accident, his mind filling in the pictures that the cameras hadn't captured.

"I work here — or at least I did last time I checked," he replied distractedly to the woman standing next to his desk.

"That's not what I meant," Linda said, her voice sounding appropriately sympathetic. "I just meant that after last night, no one was expecting you to come in this morning. You should be home in bed." Her voice dropped to a teasing whisper. "In fact, just say the word and I'll have you in bed faster than ... Superman could rescue a cat from a tree."

Linda King had been working at the Daily Planet now for the past few months. Apparently, she'd been stolen from the Washington Post to fill a gap in the city section for the Daily Planet. And since she'd been here, she'd become more and more ... forward with him — a situation he was starting to find increasingly uncomfortable. Her hints that she wanted him were becoming less and less subtle.

His ears still partially focused on the television, he couldn't help hearing the science advisor of the Governor of New Troy, Robert Stafford, begin to speak about the accident. Stafford was well known for his anti-Superman stance. Like a man unable to turn his eyes away from the scene of a car wreck, Clark slowly swivelled in the direction of the television.

"As you can see from this diagram here," Stafford said, pointing at his sketch, which appeared to be professionally done, "if Superman had approached the train from this end, he would have stood a better chance of preventing further loss of life. That is one of my big problems with Superman. Allowing a creature as strong as Superman, with no knowledge of science, to assist at accidents such as this is just asking for disaster."

"But surely Superman saved a lot of lives last night," the commentator responded. "Even if he could have saved more."

"No one is arguing that," Stafford said. "All I'm saying is that if, instead of relying on Superman, we were to spend sufficient time and money equipping and preparing our emergency services, more lives would be saved." Stafford shifted in his chair to look directly at the commentator. "Look, we all know that Superman is really Clark Kent. A reporter. And we simply can't expect a reporter to do the job meant for a well-trained emergency worker or a doctor. I understand that there were some injuries last night that, if Superman had been a qualified medical doctor, could have been dealt with much more efficiently — sparing people from further injury. A reporter is simply not equipped to handle these types of emergencies and until he's gone back to school, should he choose to do so, and taken the appropriate training and got the appropriate credentials, we should put a moratorium on his super activities."

"Oh, poor baby," Linda said as she began massaging Clark's shoulders. "Don't listen to them. They don't know what they're talking about."

Clark moved to face her, as much to get her hands off his body as to address her directly. "Thanks, Linda. But maybe you're right. Maybe I will just head back to bed. I'll see you later."

Without waiting for her to respond, he rose from his chair, grabbed his suit jacket and slipped it on as he headed towards the stairs. Was Stafford right? Did he really have the right to get involved in rescues for which he was woefully untrained? Was it possible that his presence was a hindrance to the development of

better equipped emergency services? Was he serving the present only to jeopardize the future?

He wasn't sure. All he knew was he couldn't stand aside and do nothing when people were crying for help. He just couldn't. Not as long as he could help them.

Did that mean he should go back to school, study medicine and engineering and everything else he might need to do his job as Superman? If only he had someone to talk to, to share these doubts and this pain with. If only he had ... Lois.

As soon as he disappeared into the stairwell, he shed his clothes, slipped into the Superman suit and a moment later split the sky with a sonic boom. Fortunately, he missed Stafford's response to his sudden disappearance when the sound of the sonic boom invaded the nearby television studio.

"Now, there's another problem," Stafford said. "Studies have been done on the effects of noise pollution on mental health which suggest ..."

November 1987

Lois pushed open her door with trepidation. She'd locked it when she'd left. She was certain she had. That was not how she found it now.

She reached in and flicked on the light but didn't enter. It was possible, even if not likely, that someone could still be inside. She might not exactly be known for taking the safe path in life, but she wasn't an idiot.

"No," she breathed when she finally got a good look at the place. Her room had been completely trashed. Forgetting all about her decision to be cautious, she rushed over to her bed, dropped to her knees and surveyed the now open footlocker she normally kept under her bed. Her normally locked footlocker. Only, the lock was now busted and ... "It's gone. It's all gone," she said in despair.

Now what did she do? She still had her taped interview with Cat, but without supporting evidence, she could hardly take it to Paul. How could this have happened? Maybe Cat was even in on it — get Lois out of her room, out of the sorority house, in order to find the evidence she had obtained. Maybe Cat's story about the cheerleader getting kicked out of school was all part of the plot. Don't give her the real story — give her something which would prove false in the event that they didn't find the evidence. Discredit her when a partially untrue story was published.

It was over. Or ... was it? Maybe there was another way to come at this story. Maybe if she could find out who had trashed her room, she could make them talk to avoid criminal charges.

Re-energized, Lois jumped to her feet and rushed back over to her desk, grabbing her phone book. Calling 911 didn't seem right. After all, this wasn't exactly an emergency — or not the type usually associated with a 911 call anyway. So ... She grabbed her phone book and flipped through it until she found the number for the police station. A moment later, she was dialing her phone.

"You have reached the Metropolis Police Department, 12th Precinct."

"Yes, my name is Lois Lane and I'm calling to report a ..."

"Please hold."

Immediately, Lois heard elevator music coming over the line.

She slammed the phone down in frustration. For a moment, she toyed with calling 911, but then rejected that idea. No. She would go down to the police station herself. It was what she should have done to begin with anyway. She would convince the police to come back here and dust for prints. And hadn't she read something recently about blood and hair samples being used to place a person at the scene of a crime? What was it called again? DNA! That was it. She'd insist that they look for DNA evidence. And then, when she identified who had done this, she would nail their butts to her wall — right beside her poster signed by

Norcross and Judd!

June 1997

The sun had set quite some time ago and the dim lighting in the newsroom testified to the fact that most of the staff had long since left for the day. Lit by the light coming off the computer monitor, Clark put the finishing touches on his story. With a sigh, he hit send to forward the story to the latest editor in chief of the Daily Planet — Preston Carpenter.

After Clark had flown himself out, he'd returned to his apartment, determined to get some sleep. But after waking only thirty minutes into his nap by a bone-chilling nightmare, he'd risen and turned on the television. The talking heads were still debating what he could have done better. Everything from which individuals he should have dealt with first to the damage he'd apparently done to the investigation into the causes of the accident due to his moving some of the rail cars during his rescue attempts. He'd yelled at the television that he'd had no choice — given that a woman had been trapped under one of the cars and would certainly have died there if he had not acted. People were even debating whether or not Superman should be prohibited from further rescues.

That was when he'd finally quit yelling at the television and come to the Planet — determined that he needed to present his side of the story to the public. He'd titled the article, 'Why I need to help,' and it was an defense for what he had done during the train accident and the reasons he couldn't just stand by and not help in the future.

Having finally finished his article and sent it to the editor, he began the process of shutting down his computer.

"Kent, what the hell is this?"

Carpenter's voice yelling from the doorway of his office caused Clark to look in his boss' direction. The man was waving some pieces of paper at him.

There had been a series of editors hired by James Olson to replace Perry White since Perry had become mayor of Metropolis. The jury was still out on how long Carpenter would last. Could be he was the one who would survive — or he could go the way of his predecessors? Only time would tell.

"Sir?" Clark asked, rising from his desk. He had to admit he hoped that Carpenter was one of the short-term editors. After all, he didn't particularly like Preston Carpenter's management style. Carpenter wanted every little thing done his way and didn't have much patience for anyone who did things a little bit differently — which, of course, meant that he had little tolerance for Clark aka Superman.

"This garbage you submitted on the fire. It's not a story — it's an editorial. The Daily Planet is not your personal forum for defending your actions. If there is an editorial to be written on your activities during the train accident, I'll be the one to write it, not you. Your job is to write the news."

Clark bit his tongue, stopping himself just in time from asking Carpenter if he planned to write such an editorial — knowing that if Carpenter did have an editorial in mind, he wasn't likely to take Superman's side in the argument. "Do you want me to write up the train accident then?" he asked instead, holding on to what was left of his temper as he turned to power his computer back up.

Carpenter snorted. "That story is old. Now, if you'd done it up first thing this morning, I might have been able to use it. But since you weren't here this morning, I had to ask Eduardo to write it."

"So do you want me to ..."

"Just go home," Carpenter said, his tone of voice sounding like an exasperated parent tired of rebuking a problem child. "Just be sure to be back here on time tomorrow morning ready to work for a change."

Clark bristled, but rather than responding, he grabbed his jacket and began walking towards the elevators.

"If this behavior continues, Kent," Carpenter continued to Clark's back, "you might want to consider finding another job. I can't use reporters I can't depend on."

Clark bit back his retort and instead, after a brief pause, continued walking. Right now, he just wanted to be anywhere other than where he was.

November 1987

Lois quickly brushed the freshly falling snow out of her hair as she stepped through the doors to the police station. It was only mid-November so why had the gods chosen tonight of all nights, when she was had to trudge through the weather, to send snow? The gods must have it in for her, or something. But then, what did they do other than toy with the lives of humans for their own amusement? This was simply further proof of that fact.

In the early morning hour, the police station was a madhouse. Hookers. Drunkards. Brigands. Addicts. Thieves. Bullies. All of the scoundrels who came out when darkness fell were represented at the police station as the sun threatened its first appearance of the day.

The contrast to the streets of the city was startling. All the night prowlers who had not attracted the attention of the police over the previous hours were now at home, safely tucked in bed as they slept off the effects of the night while those who were creatures of the day had not yet risen. Thus the streets were abandoned.

"Come on, honey," a woman near Lois said. "Just forget the charges. I can make it worth your while."

Lois glanced over to see the unimpressed police officer roll his eyes as he dragged a scantily dressed woman who looked as if she'd seen more than her fair share of hard times in handcuffs across the room.

"You've got the wrong man," a man said, directing Lois' attention over to another catch of the night, this one slightly bloody. "I was just defending myself."

"Tell it to the judge," another officer mumbled back as he pushed his capture into a hard plastic chair by the wall.

Lois stepped carefully through and around the throng of people until she reached the front desk where a bored looking officer sat.

"What can I do for you?" the woman officer asked without looking up from whatever she was writing.

"I need to report a crime," Lois responded.

"Take one of the clip boards and fill out your complaint," the woman said, still not bothering to look at Lois.

Lois stood there for a moment more. This wasn't what she wanted. She wanted to talk to someone, convince them that they needed to come back to her dorm room and gather evidence.

"Can't help you unless you fill out a complaint," the woman said, still not looking up from her work.

Lois only hesitated a moment more before taking one of the clipboards and turning to survey the room in hopes of finding a place to sit. Not spotting a place that wasn't surrounded by people who made her nervous, she leaned against the wall, dug a pen out of her backpack and began to write.

The room was quiet. Lois glanced at the clock. She'd been sitting here now for more than two hours as police officers processed the various occupants of the room. Yet here she still sat. It had now been at least fifteen minutes since the last person had left — well, except for the officer still sitting behind the main counter.

Exasperated, she rose to her feet. Patience didn't seem to be getting her anywhere fast. Maybe it was time to see if the squeaky wheel really did get the grease.

"Excuse me, Constable Gates," Lois said, after glancing at the nameplate in front of the woman at the counter. When the woman didn't look up Lois silently growled. "Look," she said, her voice suddenly sounding a little bit like her mother's when she was angry. Lois hadn't known until this moment that she even possessed such a voice.

Not that she'd never gotten mad before. In fact, she knew her temper was ... explosive at best. And she knew she had a sarcastic side when pushed. But when working, she'd always tried to be courteous and professional. Since that didn't seem to be working here ... "I'm a victim of a crime. And I've been kept sitting here for over two hours now. So if you don't mind, at least give me the courtesy of looking at me when I'm speaking to you. Otherwise, trust me when I say that you're going to see your name on the front page of the Daily Planet and it won't be for some heroic deed."

She doubted she'd actually be able to manage that — that the Daily Planet would even care that she, a lowly journalism student, was left sitting in the police station all night. But this woman didn't need to know that. Besides, she'd finally gotten the woman to look up from her work.

"That's right," Lois said. "I'm a reporter." She crossed her fingers behind her back. Not exactly the truth, but not exactly a lie either. "So if you don't want to find yourself having to answer all sorts of awkward questions about why the M.P.D. doesn't care about the victims of crime, I'd suggest you get someone out here to speak to me pronto!"

Lois was barely given time to wonder if she should have been quite so aggressive when the door to the back opened and a man in a suit and tie entered the room. He scanned the room for a moment before his eyes settled on her. Then he looked slightly confused. One eyebrow raised slightly, he glanced towards Constable Gates.

Heat flooded Lois' cheeks as she suddenly realized what must have happened. Obviously, Gates' description of her had been colorful, probably making the officer ... or whoever he was ... expect someone who looked quite different.

She forced her feelings of embarrassment aside as she rose to her feet. After all, it seemed that the aggressive approach had worked. Besides, there had to be hundreds of officers in Metropolis. What were the chances that she'd ever run into this particular one again?

"I assume you're Lois Lane?" the man said as he approached Lois. He sounded almost amused, or would have if he hadn't sounded so morose — although before she heard him speak, she wasn't sure she would have believed those two sounds could go together. "I'm Detective Bill Henderson. I take it you have a complaint."

Lois opened her mouth to object when she suddenly changed her mind. Maybe she could use this to her advantage. "Other than having to sit in a police station half the night to report a break in, not a one," Lois responded, surprising an almost grin out of the Detective. "But you can make it up to me."

"How's that?" Henderson replied, sounding intrigued.

"I need you to send a team back to my room to dust for prints and look for DNA evidence. It's crucial I know who trashed my room."

"Sorry. No can do. We can put word out so that if anything stolen is pawned, we might find it again, but that's about it."

"What?" Lois gasped. "You're the police. It's your job to find the culprits. If you only do half a job ..."

"Talk to city counsel. Increase our staff. And then maybe ..."

Henderson shrugged. "But like I said, we can send a word out to the pawn shops if you'd like to make a list of things that were stolen. You'd be surprised how often we get results that way."

"They aren't going to be pawning the things they stole," Lois

objected, almost livid now. "They stole my evidence for what would have been the biggest story to ever be published in the Ink and Quill! You're in on it, aren't you? You don't care if NTU football players write their own exams just as long as they win the Sugar Bowl for Metropolis!"

"The Ink and Quill? The university paper?" Henderson asked, raising an eyebrow. "I thought you said you worked for the Daily Planet."

Lois blushed, his accusation instantly cutting across her anger. "I never actually said I worked for the Daily Planet. I said I was a reporter and that the Daily Planet might be interested in ..." Her voice trailed off when she observed a slight crinkling around Henderson's eyes. He found this funny. Immediately, her anger resurfaced. "Although, I'm sure they would be interested to discover that the Metropolis Police Department isn't interested in doing everything they can to catch criminals, Detective."

The smile around Henderson's eyes faded. "Ms. Lane, why don't you come with me?" he said. When she gave him a suspicious look, he gestured towards the door he had entered through. Cautiously, she followed as he led her into the back of the station.

Lois sat down in a chair beside a desk over-flowing with file folders and looked at the organized confusion going on around her. At least, she hoped it was organized because it sure was confusing. Henderson had disappeared after directing her to a chair. When he returned a few minutes later, she immediately spoke.

"So why am I here, Detective, if you don't plan on properly investigating the break in of my room?"

"I wanted you to see this." He handed her a single piece of paper.

She looked at it for a moment before looking back up at Henderson.

"So there have been six murders this past year. What does that ..."

"Those are the statistics for last night."

Her mouth fell open. "Last night ..." she gasped, looking back at the paper. "There were six murders, ten rapes, two hundred and seventy robberies, a hundred and twenty felony assaults, three hundred thirty four burglaries ..." Her voice trailed off and she looked up at the Detective once again.

"See that officer over there," he said, pointing over Lois' shoulder.

Lois glanced over to see a middle-aged officer rummaging around on his desk.

"He's on his way over to Metropolis General to try to interview a young woman who was gang raped last night. She's currently fighting for her life at Metropolis General and we're desperately hoping to get a statement from her that will help us identify the culprits in case she dies. And that man ..."

Lois again looked in the direction Henderson was pointing.

"He watched his grandson get stabbed. Twelve years old. Just walking down the street with his grandfather when four youths came out of nowhere and demanded all their money, stabbing the boy when they weren't satisfied that they had gotten enough. Fortunately, the boy is going to survive, but it was just dumb luck that the attackers didn't hit any vital organs. And see her ..."

Again, Lois' gaze followed the direction of Henderson's finger.

"Her husband was killed. We think he surprised a burglar. She was upstairs sleeping at the time. Only discovered it when she woke around three o'clock in the morning and realized he wasn't in bed with her. So if you want to write a story complaining that we had insufficient resources to dust your room for prints and collect DNA evidence when all that was stolen was a bit of evidence you needed for a story you're working on, be

my guest."

When Lois stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of the police station sometime later, she felt as if she was seeing things in a new light. The stories Henderson had shared with her, just about one night in the big city, had both humbled and horrified her. She looked up at the buildings that were lit by the morning sun and swore that she would devote her life to making this city a better place. Henderson might not have had the resources to send a forensic team over to her room, but there was nothing to stop her from finding out who had taken her evidence and getting it back. She could start, in her own small way, to clean up whatever corruption she could uncover. And that started with corrupt university coaches and players who were cheating to get ahead.

With new determination in her step, she walked down the steps of the police station and turned towards the bus stop.

Through the window next to his desk, Henderson watched the young woman as she waited for the bus. She'd come in here spitting vinegar. Spirit and determination in equal measure. Yet when confronted with the reality of the situation, she'd had the courage and intelligence to adjust her perspective almost immediately.

He liked her. And he had a sneaking suspicion he'd be seeing a lot more of her in the future. He'd have to keep his eyes open. He had no doubt that she'd be making an appearance on the Daily Planet staff in the not-too-distant future. Life in Metropolis was bound to get very, very interesting when she did. In fact, maybe ...

Reaching over, he picked up the phone to place a call to an old friend. A reporter he'd first met during his tour of duty in Nam. The now editor of the Daily Planet.

"Perry White, please. Tell him Bill Henderson is calling."

June 1997

Clark collapsed back onto his couch in exhaustion. The sun was already making an appearance and he would have to be in the newsroom in a couple of hours, ready to work, if Carpenter was to be taken seriously.

Still, what was the point? Of anything?

He'd been out all night, performing rescue after rescue. He'd stopped two attempted murders, three attempted rapes, twenty four robberies and ... he wasn't sure how many burglaries and he knew he hadn't even made a dent in the crime in Metropolis.

He was just one man. One very tired and discouraged man. A man without any support system. So why would he think he could even begin to turn things around — make things better?

"One man can't really make a difference ... no matter what kind of powers he has."

"I know things are different here. I know you're different. But trust me ... powers or no powers, one man can change the world."

The conversation he'd had with the Lois from the other dimension popped into his head. She'd sounded so confident, so sure. And he'd gotten caught up in her vision. But she had been wrong. He couldn't make a difference. And if she were here right now, he'd tell her exactly that.

But she wasn't here. Nor was his own Lois. That was the problem. What he wouldn't give right now for one of her pep talks, for one indication from her that whatever he could do, it was enough.

His eyes of their own volition opened and swept the room until they landed on his copy of HG Wells' Time Machine.

He was just looking, he assured himself. Just giving in to his curiosity to see what made Well's time machine tick. Nothing more than that. He stared at the blueprints for a moment before setting them on his coffee table, inadvertently knocking over a

cup of cold coffee.

As quickly as possible, he grabbed up the plans for the time travel machine and began cleaning up the spill. When he looked back at the blueprints, he felt panic rising in his chest.

"No!"

Grabbing his cloth, he began dabbing at the plans. When he finally stopped, he breathed a sigh of relief. They were still legible — or well, mostly legible. There was one section that was a little difficult to decipher, but he thought he could understand it well enough.

Not that he was going to use it, of course. He was just looking.

"Help, Superman!"

The sound of a terrified woman's voice cut through his musing. No. No, please. He couldn't do it. He just ... couldn't. He couldn't take one more rescue, one more disaster, one more case of human suffering. He couldn't do this alone. No one could be expected to and maintain his sanity.

A moment later, he was out the door and on his way to help. The sound of a gun firing sent terror rolling through his belly as he increased his speed. When he arrived, the woman was already dead.

"Kent, are you there?"

The sound of Carpenter's voice coming over the answering machine didn't even phase Clark as he stared at the newly constructed time machine. He'd just wanted to see if it could be done. He wasn't actually planning on using it. After all, Wells was right. Tinkering with the past was simply far too dangerous.

"If your butt isn't in here in the next twenty minutes, don't bother coming in at all!" Carpenter continued into the machine.

There was no thought involved when Clark suddenly found himself packing a couple of duffle bags and tossing them into the machine before throwing on his black leather jacket. Taking a seat, he began pressing buttons.

He needed her. It was as simple as that. Besides, Wells had said that the further one went back in time to make changes, the bigger the ripples to the time line. But surely, if he just went back four years, to a time a few days before her ill-fated trip to the Congo, the changes wouldn't be all that drastic to anyone except him. Yes, a few days was all he needed. He could help her get the Congo story without going to the Congo. He'd do that, and then he'd come home. And no one would know the difference — well, except for him. His world would suddenly make sense again.

With a sudden flash of light, the world around him faded.

November 1987

Lois checked her watch as she stepped off the bus and onto the grounds of the university. Nine ten. Great. Not only was she tired and frustrated from a night spent trying to track down her story, but now she had missed the deadline for getting stories submitted to the Ink and Quill and ... she was late for class! Could this day get any worse?

She took off at a jog towards her class. Surely someone would let her borrow some paper to take notes. If not, she could always use the ever present reporter's notebook she carried in her backpack.

And, really, it wasn't as if any of the other reporters had any inkling about her story. So it wasn't as if she was in danger of being scooped. She could always get the story in next week's edition once she tracked down the missing evidence. It would just take a whole lot more work and some creative thinking on her part. But then, work had never scared Lois and creative thinking was her specialty. Keeping hold of her new found optimism, she increased her pace, darting around slower moving students to get to class.

Lois was exhausted. Totally, completely and utterly exhausted. What had ever possessed her to schedule three early morning classes back to back?

No. She knew what had led to that decision. She'd wanted to keep her afternoons free to pursue stories.

But today, it had been almost too much. She needed to get back to the dorm. To take a nap before she turned to the problem of recreating her story. Oh, darn. She'd forgotten. She was supposed to go this afternoon to help Molly and the others prepare for the party. Maybe she'd call and see if she could come in a bit later so that she could have a nap first. Otherwise, there was no way she was going to make it through tonight's party. And given the number of sorority events she'd missed lately, she could hardly skip this party, too.

Passing by a newspaper dispenser for the Ink and Quill, she absently picked up the latest edition. Yawning, she looked at the front page.

Suddenly, she was wide awake.

"I found my story!"

Molly was in the kitchen at the sorority house, cutting up some cheese for the party — only one of a number of people at the house who were preparing for the party. In fact, a number of Beta Beta boys were in the main room putting up decorations and the kitchen was crowded.

Molly looked up, smiling when she saw her friend. "Hey, that's great. I was going to see what I could do tomorrow to find it for you. I was thinking that there might be another way to ..." she began, her voice trailing off when she saw the storm clouds hovering over Lois. "Where did you find it?" she asked cautiously.

"Right here!" Lois said, tossing the Ink and Quill on the table and stabbing it with her index finger.

"So you found it in time to get it submitted?" Molly asked, still not understanding the problem. That thought, however, was pushed aside when she read the headline. "Football Players Not Writing Own Exams: Coach Also Implicated. Hey that's quite a headline. Is it really true?"

"Of course it's true," Lois said indignantly. "But that's not the point."

"Then what is?"

Lois jabbed again at the paper, focusing Molly's attention back on the copy.

"By Linda King," Lois said.

"How ... ? Wait a minute. Linda printed your story off the computer and then submitted it to the paper as her own work?" Molly picked up the paper to study it, as if in it she could find proof that one sorority sister would not have done such a thing to another. She didn't want to believe it was possible. Please let there be another explanation. "Maybe she just came across the same story as you. How do you say that now? Scooped? Isn't it possible Linda just scooped you?" Still, there was the story that Lois had been looking for last night, the one that had been deliberately copied over so ...

"This isn't a similar story, Mol. This is my story. Word for word!"

"How did she know you were working on that story, that it was even on the computer? I mean, I didn't know until you came to me last night. And even then, I didn't know what the story was about. Did you tell her?"

"Linda came in just as I was finishing the story. I knew she knew something was up, but it never occurred to me ... She saw me save the story before I left to interview one final source. She must have gone on the computer after I left and got the story. Then she went to my room in the dorm and trashed it to find my supporting evidence. She took everything to Paul at the Ink and Quill and he published it!"

"Would she have known enough about computers to make sure that I couldn't retrieve it? I've never even seen her use that computer. And, trust me, that job of erasing your story ... Whoever did it knew what they were doing."

That stumped Lois for a minute. "I don't know. Maybe she got some help or ... Hey, wait a minute. She told me once that she had her own computer at home. Would making my story completely disappear be really difficult?"

"Not if she knew what she was doing," Molly conceded. "Still, are you sure ..."

"Yes, I'm sure! Word for word, Mol! She didn't even bother to take the time to rewrite it."

"Well, isn't there something you can do about it? Go to your editor, maybe, and ..."

"Where do you think I've been! I went to talk to Paul all right. And do you want to know what he said?" The question was obviously rhetorical because she didn't even pause before continuing. "That I shouldn't make accusations I couldn't prove. He didn't believe me. Said I was just making it up because I was jealous of Linda's story. And then Linda came in and ... She announced that Paul was going to be her date at the party tonight! Then she winked at me! She winked at me and added that after the party, maybe they'd go back to the dorm to do a tour of her room!"

"Did Paul see her wink at you? That might have made him wonder if ..."

"Paul didn't see anything. Well, except for how high the slit in her skirt went or how low her neckline plunged! And do you want to know what happened then? I told him I could prove it was my story. I told him I had done one more interview. And he said ... He said ... He said that if I had found any additional information about the scandal, I should give it to Linda since it was her story!"

"So did you give her the interview?"

"Absolutely not! I just stormed out of there. Didn't even look back. That was my story, Mol. I was the one who dug up all the evidence that the football players weren't writing their own exams. I was the one who found the proof of Coach Black's involvement."

"Wait a minute!" said a new voice, entering the conversation for the first time.

Lois spun around. She'd been so engrossed in her rant that she had forgotten about the others in the kitchen who were, now that she took time to notice, watching and listening with rapt attention.

Her eyes focused on the young man who had just spoken. Ryan Wiley. Not exactly her favorite person. Something about him just rubbed her the wrong way.

"You're the one who dug up the evidence that the football players weren't writing their own exams?" Ryan asked.

"That's right," Lois responded.

"How could you do that?" Ryan continued.

"Excuse me?" Lois said, suddenly and quite unexpectedly thrown into defensive mode.

"That was the best team we ever had! We had a real shot at winning the Sugar Bowl! And now, thanks to you sticking your big nose in where it doesn't belong, all our best players will likely be thrown out of school — including Don Landover. How do you expect us to win without him?"

"I don't! All they had to do was write their own exams and they wouldn't be in this mess now. It's hardly my fault they decided to cheat!"

"Don't you have any school spirit at all? A bunch of us already have our tickets to go to New Orleans for the Sugar Bowl in January. What are we supposed to do now?"

"Enjoy Mardi Gras?" Lois asked sarcastically.

"Mardi Gras is more like spring break! Not new years!" Ryan

responded. "What are you expecting us to do? Hang around New Orleans until then."

Lois rolled her eyes. "I guess you missed my sarcasm. But hey, if you're gone until after spring break, it's not going to bother me. Might be worth your while. Trading beads to get some woman to flash her breasts at you is probably as close as you'll get to sex in your lifetime!"

"The ice queen is giving me advice on ..."

"Hey, come on, guys!" Molly interrupted, jumping between Lois and Ryan to distract Ryan from finishing his comment. "Can we calm it down here?" she begged, looking from one to the other. "We're attracting an audience."

Lois glanced around, noticing that their yelling seemed to have brought everyone in the house helping with preparations into the kitchen. And considering the party preparations, that was quite a crowd. Alpha Nu Rho girls and Beta Beta guys, even significant others who'd been cajoled into helping, many of whom Lois didn't even know.

"Hey," Ryan said. "Good. Then everyone can give their opinion. Lois here apparently was the one who uncovered the fact that the football team wasn't taking their own exams. Shall we give her a big round of applause for ruining our chances of winning the Sugar Bowl?"

"Knock it off, Rye," Molly said.

Rye? Lois glanced over at Molly. When had Molly become familiar enough with this neanderthal to call him by a nickname?

"That was you?" asked one of the other young men in the crowd. "I thought it was that Linda King chick. A lot of people are going to be furious with you when they find out that you're the one who demolished the greatest football team this university has ever seen."

Suddenly, it was all too much for Lois. Without another word, her head still held high, she turned and stalked from the room.

September 1976

Clark stepped out of the machine and looked around. So far so good. He'd set the destination to end up in an almost always deserted alley behind the Daily Planet. And deserted it was. So now he just had to make sure he had gone back in time. He grabbed one of the duffle bags and rustled through it until he found a tarp he'd thrown in for just this purpose. After taking a moment to cover the machine, he walked out of the alley and looked around.

Something seemed ... odd. But it took him a moment to realize what it was. The cars were too big, too classic looking. Gone were the small, compact machines that graced the streets of the Metropolis in 1997. It was as if someone had decided to have a classic car convention right in the middle of downtown Metropolis. But surely that wasn't right. Even if there were a classic car convention in town, surely there would be signs of the small, fuel efficient cars and large, tank-like SUVs that tended to dominate the landscape in the Metropolis he knew. And four years was hardly enough time to change all the cars to classics.

Before he could ponder the problem further, he heard a sound that made his blood run cold. A child's screech. He wasn't entirely sure what it was about the sound that cut through all the other noises of the big city or that sent terror through his heart. After all, the cry wasn't pain or fear, exactly. More like surprise. But less than a second after hearing that sound, he was in the air, streaking through the skies towards the source, absolutely petrified of failing.

Spotting the falling child, he dove, catching her in his arms before she could hit the hard ground below and breathing a sigh of relief as he floated slowly up.

His heart finally beating again, he looked at the young girl who was staring at him in disbelief, a camera grasped firmly in her hand. It was only then that he realized he wasn't in the

Superman suit. He hadn't even brought it with him. After all, there was no Superman in the past. And since he wasn't allowed to make any significant changes, he'd thought it better to leave the suit at home.

But he had made a change. Potentially a big one. He'd just saved a child from possibly dying. Not that he'd undo what he'd done, but it did drive home the point of just how careful he needed to be.

"What are you?" the child asked, breaking through Clark's thoughts. "Are you my guardian angel?"

Clark smiled. "Something like that." He slowly floated them to the ground.

"Then you've got to help! They're burying a body!"

"Who?"

"The mobsters!"

Clark glanced in the direction she was pointing, rebuking himself for not considering that others might have seen what he had done. But he'd been too caught up in his own thoughts. He let out a breath of relief when he realized that the view to the young men digging a hole was partially blocked by foliage, meaning they hadn't seen him fly. In fact, they looked awfully young to be mobsters.

"A body?" he asked as he lowered his precious cargo to the ground.

"They're burying a body. We've got to get the evidence and ..."

Clark turned back to the young men, lowering his glasses to take a closer look at the scene. And smiled.

"Come on," he said, taking a step towards the diggers.

"No! They'll kill you!"

He was stopped when she grabbed onto the sleeve of his leather jacket.

He turned back, squatting down to look her in the eye. "I'm invulnerable. They can't hurt me. So just stay behind me and you'll be fine."

She looked slightly skeptical, but after a moment slowly nodded.

He smiled. He had to admit, he liked this kid. "Okay." He rose to his feet and turned to push his way through the foliage.

"So ... what's going on here?" he asked the two teenage boys, trying to sound stern enough to satisfy the child behind him that he was taking her concerns seriously without frightening the young men he was addressing.

They stopped digging, turning towards the new arrivals. "We're digging a fire pit for the party tonight."

"They are not! They're burying a body!" exclaimed a little voice behind him.

"What's in the bag?" he asked. He already knew, of course, having x-rayed it the moment the girl had mentioned a body.

"A tent," one of the boys said in confusion. He dropped his shovel and knelt next to the bag, opening it to reveal its contents.

They stood there for a moment, all looking at the poles and canvas that made up a tent. Suddenly, the girl slipped past Clark to examine the contents of the bag for herself. He watched, amused, at how thorough she was. She'd obviously been convinced that there was a body in that bag.

"How about I take you home?" he asked.

She looked at him and then at the boys for a moment and he could swear he could see the wheels turning inside her head as she worked through the evidence for herself. Finally, she nodded. When Clark reached towards her, she put her hand in his and allowed him to lead her away.

"I guess I was wrong, huh?" she said, practically bouncing along beside him, obviously not too upset about being wrong.

"I guess so. So what's got you so happy — given that you were wrong."

"No one's dead. And ... Well, I might have been wrong, but

what a great afternoon! I met my guardian angel and I solved the case of the mysterious black bag. I wish I could do this every day."

"Maybe you should become an investigative journalist when you grow up and then you can."

"What's an invest ... investor ... what's that?"

"A reporter." When she continued to stare at him blankly, he continued. "Never mind. So what's your name?"

"Lois Lane."

He stopped dead in his tracks and stared at her. She stared right back. "Lois Lane?" He knew the words came out slightly strangled, but he couldn't seem to help it. This precocious child was the one great love of his life? No wonder the cars had been so big. He must have accidentally come back before the oil crisis had changed cars forever. "How old are you?"

"Nine," she responded, her chin jilting slightly upwards as if waiting for him to admonish her that a nine year old child shouldn't be tracking suspected mobsters through the woods. It wasn't until he, not saying a word, resumed walking along the path that she seemed to relax, catching up to him and taking his hand once again.

"What's your name?" she asked after a moment.

"Uhh ... Guardian angels don't have names."

"Sure they do. Otherwise, how could you ever get together?"

"What?" Clark asked.

Lois let out a breath of frustration at his apparent lack of understanding. "If you were at a barbeque for guardian angels and you said, 'Pass me the ketchup, Guardian Angel,' all the guardian angels would pick up their ketchup bottles and try to hand them to you. Or if you were living in a house with a bunch of other guardian angels and someone called on the phone, how would you know who they wanted to talk to? So you must have names. Otherwise you could never get together. It would be too frustrating."

Clark's head was spinning. He had to be very careful here. Had to avoid changing the future. And being questioned by this particular child had all the earmarks for a major change to the future. He wasn't sure how, but if anyone could cause serious changes to the future, it was Lois Lane — even one who was nine years old.

"Do you know your own way home?" he asked.

When she nodded, he took to the sky, disappearing as fast as his powers would let him, trembling as the force of the encounter finally hit him. He thought he heard a click and a zzzt sound behind him but didn't turn to look.

He'd come too far back in time. So ... Without thinking further, he sped back to where he'd left the time machine. Something had obviously gone wrong.

November 1987

Lois dragged herself back to her room, all the energy gone from her step. Sleep. What she needed now was just to crawl into bed and sleep. She couldn't think, couldn't figure out her next move until she'd had a little shut eye.

She pulled out her key and inserted it in the lock almost without thinking. When she'd completed that task, she opened the door and stared in dismay at her room. Her completely trashed room.

Oh, right. She'd forgotten about that.

Stepping inside, she closed the door behind her and stared around in dismay. Well, the police weren't coming to dust for prints or collect DNA samples. And it wasn't as if she didn't know who had done this, so there wasn't really any point in leaving things as they were. On the other hand, she also didn't have the strength right now to face cleaning up either.

She spotted her footlocker sitting beside the bed. The one with the newly broken lock. Shuffling slowly over to the bed, she

made a decision. She'd toss the stuff on her bed into the locker — most of it had come from there anyway. Once her bed was clear, she'd climb in. She'd worry about picking up the rest of her stuff later.

Leaning over the bed, she began to pick things up and toss them into the locker when her hand fell on a small, square photograph. Automatically, she flipped it over and stared down at it. It wasn't much more than a dark streak across a clear, blue sky.

Sighing, she sat down on the side of the bed and stared at the photo for a moment before looking around for another photo she knew must be there as well — even as her mind flashed back to that day in September when she was nine.

The second photo was a picture of half his face. Or, more accurately, a corner of his face: a warm, brown eye, surrounded by the single lens of a pair of glasses, an eyebrow, the side of a nose, the corner of his mouth, dark hair and an ear. All blurred slightly. The picture she'd accidentally taken as she'd fallen out of that tree. She'd only remembered that it existed later and had to go back to the shoreline to retrieve it. As a result, in addition to everything else, the photo was also slightly crumpled and soiled.

The photo of the black streak was the photo she'd taken when he'd flown off.

Of course, no one had listened when she'd told them about him — her guardian angel. Still, the photos were proof enough to her that she hadn't imagined him. He had been her guardian angel so ...

"Where were you when I needed you today?" she asked, staring down at the photos.

When the photos failed to answer, Lois tossed them in the footlocker and then simply pushed the remainder of her stuff off her bed. She crawled beneath the covers and was asleep the instant her head hit the pillow.

April 1993

Lois settled back into her seat on the plane and relaxed. The seat next to her was empty now — the passenger who had occupied it having exited the plane in Rome. She was grateful. If she'd been forced to listen to one more story about that woman's grandchildren, she'd have been compelled to take drastic action. The woman had talked non-stop about them almost from the moment they had departed Metropolis.

Letting her mind drift, she saw again the face of the man who had tried to prevent her from boarding this flight. What had been his problem, anyway?

But there was something about him ... Something about his eyes that seemed familiar to her. Her eyes popped open as it suddenly occurred to her why those eyes had looked so familiar.

He had the same eyes as the man in that well-worn snapshot she'd taken so long ago. The man who had flown in, saving her life. The man who had claimed to be her guardian angel.

And he'd been warning her that if she went to the Congo, she'd never return. A sudden chill went through her body, but she forced herself not to panic. She had to think this through logically. Okay, so he'd warned her. But surely, now that she knew that her life was in danger, she could avoid her fate. She'd just have to be particularly careful.

Suddenly, relaxing was the last thing on her mind as she glanced around suspiciously at her fellow passengers.

September 1976

Clark landed beside the time machine and was just removing the tarp when a headache hit him, hard and fast. He buckled at his knees, the scenery swirling around him, as he dropped to the pavement. Every muscle in his body felt as if it were being torn apart. Kryptonite. It had to be. But kryptonite had never hurt as badly as this. No, with kryptonite, it felt as if he was on fire. This ... this was like being torn apart by wild horses. He gritted

his teeth and closed his eyes, as the agony continued, unabated.

He had no idea how long he lay there, knees up to his chest as he writhed in agony, before the pain started to fade. He glanced around cautiously, but there was no sign of an eerie green glow. And he was alone, ruling out the possibility that someone carrying kryptonite had walked past him. He tested his powers and was relieved to discover he had them all.

The pain was almost gone now. Still not knowing what had happened, he cautiously rose to his feet. As the soreness in his bones continued to linger, he turned his attention back to the time machine. Maybe the pain was just a delayed reaction to traveling through time. Either way, what was important now was to fix the problem that had brought him too far back in time and get to where he needed to be.

November 1987

Perry picked up the current copy of the Ink and Quill and settled back in his chair. Since becoming editor, he always perused the university paper, keeping an eye open for young up-and-comers he could consider bringing into the Daily Planet. And over the years, the practice had served him well. It allowed him to offer positions to journalism students and graduates who took their chosen profession seriously.

His eyebrows rose when he saw the headline. It seemed the Ink and Quill had really outdone itself this week. The back of his mind tweaked.

Wait a minute. Hadn't Henderson told him that the young woman who had come into the police station early this morning complaining that her evidence had been stolen had been ranting about football players not writing their own exams? Would the Ink and Quill have really printed a story without having the evidence to back it up? Didn't seem likely that the old fuddy-duddy who served as their faculty advisor would have allowed that. Did that mean they'd located the evidence?

And hadn't Henderson said that the name of the young woman writing the article had been a Lois Lane? This article was written by a Linda King.

Perry leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling for a moment. He supposed that two reporters working at the Ink and Quill could both have stumbled onto the same story. Or ...

He jumped out of his chair and strode to the door to his office. "Ralph!" he bellowed, catching the attention of the newest copy boy. "Get me a copy of every edition of the Ink and Quill since September!"

When Ralph just looked at him blankly, Perry continued. "New Troy University's paper. I need a copy of every edition since September. Just go down to the morgue and talk to Marg. She'll help you find them."

"Yes, sir," Ralph said, shuffling slowly towards the elevators.

Perry watched him go, slightly troubled. The boy showed no enthusiasm and no initiative. It was just too bad his aunt sat on the board of directors at the Daily Planet.

Dismissing Ralph from his mind, Perry returned to his chair, picked up the current edition of the Ink and Quill and began to read.

An hour later, Perry had his answer. It hadn't been hard to see when one had all the pieces to the puzzle. The story about the football players had a hard edge to it. But the writing style was solid. Needed some polish around the edges, granted. Needed a bit more of the human touch. But still solid work.

And when compared with stories both Linda King and Lois Lane had written for the Ink and Quill so far this year ... Certain turns of phrase. Certain habits, both bad and good, when taken with the evidence that Perry White had received from Bill Henderson this morning, convinced Perry that he knew what had happened. It seemed that this Lois Lane that Bill had ranted about had just learned a hard lesson.

Perry clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth. The question was, what happened now? Given the story Lois Lane had managed to put together about the football players, it seemed this was indeed a young woman worth keeping his eye on. But would this incident make her stronger, more determined, or would it crush her spirit?

He'd have to keep a close eye on the Ink and Quill for the next few months, and in particular a young reporter named Lois Lane. Depending on how she responded to this crisis, Bill might be right. She might be just what the Daily Planet needed.

"You've got to come to the party, Lois," Molly insisted. "After all, what's the alternative? Sitting around here, moping the rest of the night?" She gave Lois a fake pout.

Involuntarily, Lois smiled.

"See!" Molly exclaimed, deciding that Lois was beginning to crack. "It'll be fun."

"Define fun."

Molly playfully bumped her arm against Lois'. After Lois had left the sorority house, Molly had worried. But with so much to do for the party, it had taken her a couple of hours to get away. Finding Lois after that had been simple enough, waking her up had been quite another matter. Still, since Lois had done it to her the night before ...

Besides, this party promised to be the biggest social event of the semester. And Molly knew if she hadn't come after her friend, she would have spent the entire party worrying about her.

"Come on, Lois," Molly continued. "I need you to ride shotgun for me tonight."

"Shotgun?"

"Well, given that there will be all those good-looking, available males there and given that I'm going to be the hottest girl there, someone needs to be watching my back, making sure I'm not kissing one guy while an even hotter one is getting away."

Lois laughed. "You wish!"

Molly smiled, heartened by the sound of her friend's laughter. "So what do you say? Come to the party?"

Lois rolled her head towards her friend, looking at her briefly before finally giving in to the inevitable, unable to resist her friend's sad little pout — not to mention her obvious concern.

"Okay, I'll come."

"Great!" Molly said, springing up from the bed. "We'll have a blast. I promise."

"But I'm not dressing up, Mol," Lois added. "I'm just coming to watch your back. Make sure you don't pick up any losers."

Molly smiled and twirled towards the door. As she grabbed the handle, she turned back around. "Then wear your acid washed jeans. They fit great. Oh, and that orange sweater with the three quarter-length sleeves. Given the way it shows off your cleavage, you'll have all the guys panting." She winked at Lois. "Might even give you a chance to pick up one or two of my castoffs."

Without waiting for a reply, she flounced out of the room, leaving Lois laughing behind her, thinking about how lucky she was to have a friend like Molly.

Sparks flew, causing Clark to jump from the time machine the instant it re-materialized. Something had definitely gone wrong. But what? Okay, so maybe the parts of the plan that he'd spilled coffee on had been a little ... hard to read. But obviously, it worked. He'd met a nine year old Lois Lane. So he'd gone back in time.

No the problem, whatever it was, had to be connected with the settings to determine the date he traveled to. And before jumping again, he'd have to take another look at the plans, try to correct it. It briefly occurred to him that unless he could fix it, he'd have problems getting back to his own time.

Still, he pushed those thoughts aside. Right now, the sun was getting low in the sky. That meant he needed to figure out exactly when he'd jumped to, find a place to store the time machine until he could fix it and maybe even look for a place to stay.

He supposed he could fly the machine to some deserted tropical island where there were plenty of bananas and coconuts to eat and stay there until the repairs were done. But the idea of being a hermit had never appealed to him. Besides, there was something about this city which grabbed him — no matter what time zone he may have leapt into. And at least he had thought to bring some money with him in case he had to stay for a while.

Which brought up a point. First order of business: what was the date?

After covering the time machine once again with the tarp, he walked out of the alley, looking for the dispenser for the Daily Planet.

November 14, 1987.

Okay, so that meant he'd leapt forward in time. Not as far as he'd planned. But still ... he was heading in the right direction. Only another ten years and he'd be back where he'd started.

His mind flashed back to a young, precocious child. The nine year old Lois. She would be ... what? Twenty in November of 1987? That's right. She'd have turned twenty in late September. And, if he recalled his Lois history, she went to New Troy University. It would be her first year given that a serious car accident in highschool had caused her to lose a semester. So ... what would a twenty year old Lois Lane be like? Just a look. Surely just getting a look at her wouldn't hurt the time line.

He was unaware of the sloppy grin that settled on his face when, previous chores forgotten, he began walking towards the New Troy University campus.

PART TWO

'For Better or Worse'

Lois had to smile as she approached the Alpha Nu Rho sorority house. Even from a block away, she could see that the old place was almost alive — light blazing from every window except a few on the upper floor where members of the sorority leadership lived, music spilling out the doors and windows and onto the street.

*"Well, I guess it would be nice,
if I could touch your body.
I know not everybody has got a body like you.
But I've got to think twice
before I give my heart away ... "*

People were wandering inside — groups, couples, singles. Lois stopped walking. Paul was probably in there, with Linda hanging all over him. Could she really do this? Could she walk in there, see them and not fall to pieces? Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea, after all.

Still, Molly had done a great job hiring the band. They were good. Playing current hits rather than their own music, of course. But still ... She recognized the opening lines of George Michael's Faith. The ground trembled under the beat.

*"But I need some time off from that emotion.
Time to pick my heart up off the floor.
When that love comes down without devotion.
Well, it takes a strong man, baby,
but I'm showing you the door."*

Her heart instantly picked up the rhythm. And she found herself singing the familiar song, her heart and feet both lifting almost immediately, and without making a conscious decision to do so, she found herself walking towards the house as she sang softly to herself.

*"Cause I've got to have faith.
I've got to have faith.
Because I've got to have faith, faith, faith."*

I've got to have faith, faith, faith."

She bumped into a couple cuddled together in the darkness and muttered a quick, embarrassed apology. But before that moment could throw her back into depression, the beat of the song again called to her and she resumed singing.

Her feet unexpectedly picked up the beat of the song she found herself half dancing, half walking the remaining distance to the house, her voice stronger now as she continued to sing.

*"Before this river becomes an ocean.
Before you throw my heart back on the floor:
Oh, baby, I'll reconsider my foolish notion.
Well I need someone to hold me.
But I'll wait something more."*

She danced around a couple of young women she didn't know, not caring if they thought she was crazy.

Her singing trailed off as she stepped through the doors even as the music played on. Spotting Molly almost immediately, she sprinted over, tossing her jacket on a nearby chair, grabbing her surprised friend by the hand and pulling her onto the dance floor. Molly laughed and then began dancing with her friend, joining in when Lois resumed singing — singing the song to each other on the dance floor while ignoring the looks of those around them.

*"Before this river becomes an ocean.
Before you throw my heart back on the floor:
Oh, baby, I'll reconsider my foolish notion.
Well I need someone to hold me.
But I'll wait something more."*

*"Cause I've got to have faith.
I've got to have faith.
Because I've got to have faith, faith, faith.
I've got to have faith, faith, faith."*

Both young women dissolved into a fit of giggles when the music ended. Arms wrapped around each other's waists, they moved together off the dance floor.

"You're in a better mood," Molly commented when they arrived by the bar that had been set up on one side of the room.

"Well, you know what I always say, Mol? You can't keep a good woman down."

Molly smiled, turning towards the bar. "What do you want?" she asked loudly as the band began playing another song. "Want to try some of our special, super-secret sorority punch?"

Lois crinkled her nose in disgust.

"What?" Molly asked.

"Too fruity."

"How would you know? You haven't even tried it."

"My mom was a sorority sister, Mol. Or have you forgotten?"

"Uhh ... So ... not a fan?"

Lois shook her head.

"So what'll it be?" Molly asked determined to play bartender.

"A glass of white wine will be fine."

Molly's eyebrows rose.

"Okay, so maybe I'm not exactly twenty-one yet. But one glass isn't going to kill me," Lois responded. "Besides, everyone drinks in university. It's a law or something."

Molly gave her head a shake but still reached for the wine bottle.

"Hi, girls."

Lois tensed when she heard Linda's voice behind her.

"Hi, Linda," Molly said.

Lois, still not turning to look at Linda, couldn't help a small smile from forming when she heard the chill in Molly's voice. It seemed obvious that Molly had chosen sides.

"You going somewhere?" Molly asked.

This time, Lois did turn, seeing Linda all dolled up underneath her jacket.

"Paul doesn't want to stay at some college party. So we're going out for supper at some exclusive club he knows about.

Then ... We'll see." She wiggled her eyebrows.

Without waiting for a response, she flounced over to where Paul was in conversation with Bob Stafford. Lois couldn't help the feelings that rose in her chest when she saw Paul turn and smile when Linda took his arm.

"Using fake ID, I bet. Hope she gets caught," Molly said. "So how about that wine?"

Lois looked back at her friend who instantly noticed the moisture in her eyes.

"Hey, come on," Molly said. "Trust me on this. From what I've heard, Paul's not that much of a catch. And at least you won't have to see either of them again tonight."

"What do you mean he isn't much of a catch? What did you hear?"

Molly poured Lois a glass of wine and handed it to her, as if giving herself time to decide whether or not to confide in Lois.

"Come on, Mol. Spill."

"Okay, I didn't say anything before because you seemed so enamored with him and I figured if it ever got to that point, you could judge for yourself, but ... Well, rumor going around last year from someone who briefly dated him was that he's really bad in bed."

Lois, who'd been about to take a sip of wine, quickly pulled the glass away from her mouth as laughter forced its way past her throat. "That's horrible, Mol," Lois gasped. "I'm sure it was just sour grapes."

"No, trust me on this. She went into explicit detail. Seems lover-boy over there thinks foreplay consists of two kisses and some disco music. And that's being generous. Seems he couldn't ... hold it longer than that."

"Are you serious?"

Molly nodded. "Paul couldn't get a date for the rest of the year. I think he was relieved when she graduated and a new crop of girls came to the school."

"Really?"

Molly nodded again.

Lois wasn't entirely sure that she believed Molly, but just the thought did make her feel better. The picture of Linda's reaction when she discovered this for herself — and Lois had no doubt she would soon — tickled Lois' funny bone. She glanced over at Linda and Paul and this time had to fight the urge not to laugh.

"Well, come on. Get yourself some punch and we can find a seat for you to boy-watch," Lois said, turning back to Molly. "Remember. We're on a mission tonight to find you the hottest guy here."

Molly poured herself a glass of punch and took a sip, spewing it out immediately. "Hey, what is this?" she instantly exclaimed. "Who spiked the punch?"

Lois couldn't help it — she laughed. The spiking of the super-secret sorority punch, perfected from years of practice, would be sacrilege to Molly. She fell silent immediately when Molly glared at her. "Sorry," she muttered sheepishly, unable to keep a small note of amusement out of her voice.

Molly gave her a look that could only be described as tolerant exasperation. "Why don't you find somewhere for us to sit? I've got to take care of this." With that, Molly picked up the bowl of punch and began carefully carrying it towards the kitchen.

Lois watched her go before looking around the crowded house. Spotting a table with a couple of chairs on the other side of the dance floor, she took her wine and slipped through the crowd to get to the table. Fortunately, the table was still available when she finally got through. Taking a seat, she set her wine on the table and took in the general revelry. The band chose that moment to take a break, causing the noise level to drop by several decibels.

"Hey, kid."

Lois turned, smiling when she spotted the young man, a

familiar face at his side, moving towards her.

"Hi, Joe," she said. "Debby." Her voice wasn't quite as warm on the woman's name. Not cold, exactly, but not really friendly either. After all, old habits died hard. And in high school, she and Debby had, in a sense, been rivals for Joe's affections. Debby had eventually won — hands down. And although Lois didn't particularly care, the tension between the two young women remained.

"Lois," Debby responded, using much the same tone of voice as Lois.

"So Joe managed to drag you out to this?" Lois asked, suddenly deciding that it was time to end their rivalry.

"Where Joe goes, I go," Debby responded, obviously not picking up on Lois' intentions.

Lois decided not to respond, instead she looked back at Joe. "So what exactly brought you here? You're not a member of Beta Beta and Deb's not even going to university here. Just gate crashing?"

Joe laughed. "Just don't report us, okay?"

"No problem."

"Actually, though, we're not staying. Although, I've heard a lot of people are planning to crash."

"Really? Why?"

"Biggest party on campus. What do you think?"

"Okay, stupid question. So what brought you by if you're not crashing the party?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

Lois' eyebrows rose. "Really? What about?" She gestured to the chairs.

Joe and Debby both sat down before Joe continued. "I just thought you should know that word that you were actually the one who broke the story about the football players is all over campus. A lot of people are really mad at you."

"Great! I get the hassle. Linda gets the glory."

"Just wanted to warn you to watch your back."

"Why? What have you heard?"

"Crazy talk, probably. Nothing that really makes much sense. Still, I thought you should know."

"We thought you should know," Debby said, joining the conversation for the first time.

Lois, surprised, looked at Debby, giving her a smile when the meaning of her words sank in. Maybe Debby wanted to put the rivalry of the past to rest, too. Debby returned the smile with a tentative smile of her own.

"Thanks," Lois said softly, giving the response directly to Debby.

Debby shrugged, obviously slightly embarrassed by the acknowledgment.

"Just watch your back okay?" Joe said. "I sort of feel responsible. I never should have given you that tip."

"No!" Lois said, reaching out to touch his hand briefly but withdrawing it almost immediately in order to avoid raising Debby's ire. "This isn't your fault! This is what I do. I dig into the slimy underbelly of society and expose it to public scrutiny."

"Not that you have any delusions of grandeur," Joe said with a grin.

Lois gave him a smile. "None whatsoever," she responded playfully.

"The play," Debby said.

"Huh?" Lois responded.

"Oh, right," Joe said, even as he rose to his feet. "We've got tickets to a play and we really should be going, but ... Are you sure you're going to be all right? I mean, we could stay and make sure that ..."

"Go!" Lois said emphatically. "I'm fine."

Joe hesitated for a moment more before deciding to accept her assessment. "Just be careful, kid. I'd hate to see anything

happen to you."

"Hey, I'm indestructible," Lois said, not allowing him to realize how much his obvious concern was unnerving her. Whatever he had heard must have been pretty bad. "But thanks for the warning."

She watched, lost in thought as Debby and Joe left the table. What possibly could have spooked Joe so badly? And what should she do about it? Before she could ponder the issue too deeply, a man's voice saying her name brought her out of her thoughts.

"Lane."

Lois looked up from where she was nursing her wine. "What do you want, Bob?" she asked. The last thing she needed right now was to deal with Paul's side-kick, Bob Stafford.

"I wanted to tell you to knock it off."

"Knock what off?" she asked, not in the mood for games.

"Spreading that lie that you were actually the one who got the story about the football players."

"Not that I really care what you think, but it's not a lie."

"You know what your problem is, Lane?"

"No. But I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"You need to get laid. Might get rid of that pole up your ..."

"Bite me," she said, interrupting him.

He leaned over, placing his palms flat on the table, his face so close to hers that she could smell the alcohol on his breath.

"Watch your step. We know how to handle people who aren't team players." After straightening up, he walked away without a backward glance.

Lois rolled her eyes. If Joe were to be believed, she had bigger things to worry about than Bob Stafford.

"Hey, Stretch!"

Lois spun around in her seat, expecting trouble. "Teddy?" she asked when she saw the young man standing there. She let out a breath of relief. If there was one person in this room she didn't have to worry about, it was Teddy. He was in gymnastics with her and harmless as a fly. If only he would stop calling her 'Stretch.'

"How's it going, Teddy?"

"Not bad. But you've missed the last few classes, Stretch."

She sighed. Maybe she should drop the gymnastics, which was what she was currently using to stay in shape along with her usual morning jogs, and take up some sort of self-defense. Judo, maybe. Or Tae Kwan Do. Yes, definitely Tae Kwan Do. She'd do better learning some sort of kick-boxing than wrestling techniques.

"Stretch?"

Lois' attention was diverted from Teddy by the monster of a guy with no-neck coming to a stop behind him. Lois tensed. He had to be a football player. Was he with Teddy? She glanced at Teddy, noting that he seemed as surprised as she by a new person entering the conversation. He wasn't with Teddy.

"Uhh ..." Teddy said, glancing over at the other man. "Yeah, it's because of the positions she can stretch into in gymnastics."

"Yeah?" asked No-Neck. "Maybe we should see just how far we can bend her. What do you think, four-eyes?" He clasped Teddy's shoulder none-too-gently.

"Wha ..." Teddy began.

"Hey, leave him alone!" Lois objected, jumping to her feet. "If you've got a problem with me, take it up with me."

"You're right," No-Neck said, releasing Teddy's shoulder in order to place a hand in the center of his chest. "Get lost, four-eyes," he said, giving Teddy a push that caused him to stumble backwards.

Once Teddy recovered his balance, he hesitated for a moment, looking at Lois. She nodded. Teddy was a nice guy, but he weighed no more than a hundred and ten pounds. No-Neck would easily make mincemeat out of him. Teddy turned and fled.

"What's up, Frank?" another man said.

Lois turned around to see someone else approaching from behind. She knew, however, who this person was. No one who went to New Troy University would have any doubt about this individual's identity — Donald Landover, star quarterback for the New Troy University Devils. He was flanked by two other no-neck Neanderthals.

"And the hits just keep coming," Lois mumbled under her breath.

"You met Lane yet?" Frank asked Landover.

"So you're Lane," Landover said, running his eyes down her body in a way that made her want to squirm.

"What's it to you?" she asked, folding her arms across her chest to force his eyes to return to her face.

He smirked at her, but his eyes blazed. She had to force herself not to take a step back, but instinctively she knew to show no fear. Landover would thrive on her fear.

"Now what are we going to do with you?" Landover asked, making a circle around her, eyeing her up as if considering the problem.

"Since she can apparently bend any way she wants, I say we find out exactly how far she can bend before breaking," Frank repeated.

"She can bend any way she wants?" Landover asked.

Frank nodded. "Yeah."

"So you're pretty flexible, are you?" he asked Lois.

She simply glared at him over her shoulder.

"I can think of a way to put that flexibility to use," Landover came to a stop in front of her before making an obscene gesture with his hand that caused the others to laugh, but made Lois feel slightly dirty.

She refused to let her feeling show on her face and instead ran her eyes deliberately down his body until it rested on the place he had just grabbed. "Now, why do I think you don't have the equipment to take advantage of it?"

His smirk faded. He stepped in closer, leaning towards her. "I'd be careful if I were you."

"Why? You think I'm scared of you?" She injected as much incredulity in her voice as she could manage.

He kept her eyes fully on hers. "I never said you needed to be scared of me. It's just that you've made a whole lot of enemies in this school. Someone might try to ..." He shrugged. "Well, I can hardly speak for what others might do."

"What's going on here?"

Landover looked over to see who had interrupted. "Nothing," Landover said, stepping back, hands raised innocently. "We were just talking."

Lois glanced over at the newcomer to the crowd. Her eyebrows rose. Ryan Wiley, flanked by a few Beta Beta guys. But what was Ryan doing? He hated her as much as Landover did — and for exactly the same thing. Still, he was big enough to be intimidating — unlike Teddy. And he'd obviously grabbed a few of the bigger Beta Beta guys to back him up.

Ryan and his posse stood there, waiting until the football players backed away.

"Thank you," Lois said, confused.

Ryan turned and looked at her, disgust radiating off his face. "I didn't do it for you. But Molly doesn't deserve to have her party turned into a brawl. If Landover wants to exact his revenge somewhere else, he has my blessing."

With that, he turned and walked away.

Lois sank back onto her chair. Picking up her wine, she took a sip, her hand trembling slightly in delayed reaction. Oh, yeah. Joe was right. The football players were mad at her. And after her encounter with Landover, she knew she needed to take the threat seriously.

"I thought I might find you here."

Lois tensed. Now what? She looked up. "Russell?" she asked,

confused when he staggered slightly before sitting down at her table. Great! Just what she didn't need. Dealing with Linda's step-brother — and by the looks of it, he was sloshed. The last thing she needed right now was another warning about stealing Linda's thunder.

He slapped his bottle of beer on the table so hard it slopped over slightly. Not that Russell noticed.

"Just what is it with you?" Russell asked. "Think I'm not good enough for you or something?"

"What are you talking about?" Lois asked, looking around in hopes that Molly might be making her way over to rescue her from this bozo.

"The date! We had a date. You stood me up!"

"I didn't stand you up," Lois said. What was taking Molly so long anyway? "I called and cancelled."

"You're gay, aren't you?"

"What?" Lois asked, looking at the drunk man sitting at her table for the first time and wishing he'd lower his voice.

"Yeah. That's it, isn't it? You're a freaken dyke!" With the last word, he gestured towards her, knocking over his bottle of beer.

Beer poured over the table and into her lap.

"Idiot!" she exclaimed, jumping up and rushing over to a nearby table to grab some napkins. Moving as quickly as she could, she began to wipe futilely at her jeans and top and arms and neck and everywhere else that had been sloshed with beer.

When she'd finished cleaning up as best she could, she looked back at her table. Russell, it seemed, had vanished. Just as well. Maybe he wasn't so drunk as not to realize the need for a strategic retreat. After all, if he'd still been there, she'd have killed him!

Marching back over to her table, she picked up her glass of wine and downed the remainder. Molly had obviously been detained — the joys of being the hostess, no doubt. So she'd find Molly, make her excuses and then head back to the dorm. As she set down her glass, she looked at it in confusion. That had tasted slightly salty. Weird.

Dismissing that thought from her mind, she turned to look for Molly. With everything that had happened, Lois was no longer in the mood for a party.

Clark had enjoyed his walk. He could have been to New Troy University in less than a second. But he was enjoying the anticipation. That precocious nine year old child was now a twenty year old young woman. And he had been given an opportunity to see it.

But it would just be a glimpse, he promised himself. He couldn't afford anything more. No. Once he'd had a chance to see what she was like at twenty, he'd return to the time machine and start working on getting it fixed.

Of course, he really had no idea how to go about finding Lois. He knew she'd gone to New Troy University. But since she had been raised in Metropolis, did she live at home with her folks, on campus or somewhere else entirely? And on a Friday evening, was she even going to be on campus? Maybe he'd have been better off finding a place to hide the time machine tonight and then taken a look for her on campus in the morning.

Rounding a corner, he noticed the house immediately. Hard not to. It was lit up and practically bouncing under the force of the loud music coming from inside. People were outside, talking, laughing, rough-housing and generally enjoying the newly falling snow.

He smiled, his mind taking him back to his days in university. It briefly crossed his mind to wonder what all the neighbors were thinking of the racket. But looking around, he realized that this close to campus, the apartments around here were probably all occupied by university students who, even if they weren't at this

party, were out doing some partying themselves on this Friday evening.

Or they were out on dates — a tried and true Friday evening mating ritual that took place at universities throughout the country.

What if Lois was on a date? His heart twisted at the thought, even though he knew he had no right or reason to be jealous. Even if she were on a date, he knew she was single in 1993. So none of these relationships, assuming she'd had any, had lasted. Besides, it wasn't as if she were his — at least, not yet. Still, seeing Lois with another man and knowing he couldn't interfere if he didn't want to disturb the time line would be hard.

Hey, why was he thinking so negatively? She could be doing something with her girlfriends or studying or, knowing Lois, getting in trouble. A small grin quirked at the corners of his mouth on the last thought.

He glanced back at the house when the volume of the music suddenly increased. The door had opened and three of the occupants spilled out into the street. By the look of their shadows, it appeared that one was drunk and the others were holding him up.

"Hey, I don't wanta leave." Or her. The drunk slur of a woman made it clear that one of those leaving the house was a woman. "I wanta dance some more. Com' on. Let'ssss go back inside 'n dance."

Clark stopped and watched as the shadows of the men and woman got closer. The men appeared to be sober. The woman, however, was quite drunk.

"No, it's time to get you home," the one of the men responded.

"I don' wanna go home," the woman slurred. "Hey, whata 'bout you?" She turned her attention to the other man. "You wanna dance?"

The new target just grunted as the men continued to half drag the woman down the sidewalk.

"Girlfriend got a little bit too drunk," one of the men explained when he spotted Clark watching them.

Clark nodded. He'd carried enough of his friends home while in college to know what that was all about. They approached him on the sidewalk and he smiled in understanding.

As they got up beside him, the woman suddenly turned, grabbing onto his jacket. "What about you, handsome? You wanna dance?"

Clark reached up to pry the woman's hands off his jacket when he caught his first sight of her face, staring up at him through blurry eyes. For a moment in time, the world around him seemed to stand still.

"Lois," he whispered.

There was some sort of scuffle around him, some sort of urgent whispers. But Clark didn't pay any attention — his eyes and heart focused completely on the disheveled woman standing, sort of, before him.

"So, handsome, where you been all my life?" Lois asked, running a hand provocatively down his chest, carefully tracing the well-defined muscles.

"I ... I ... I ..." Clark said, suddenly wondering which of them were drunk. She slipped slightly and he quickly reached out, pulling him more tightly against her to keep her from falling. He had to get out of here. He had to go now. After all, he'd just come to get a glimpse of her not to ... Well, not to do what he appeared to be doing now.

He turned to her friends, looking to turn her back over to them, but for some reason, they had vanished. What?

"Com' inside and dance with me, handsome," Lois slurred, seeming to find her feet again and squirming out of his arms. Grabbing onto the sleeve of his leather jacket, she began dragging him, as well as she was able, back towards the house.

Not that it was much of a struggle. Clark seemed unable to resist her slightest tug, steadying her automatically as she stumbled up the steps and rushing around to open the door when she fumbled on its execution.

Clark wasn't entirely certain what to do. That Lois was extremely intoxicated was not in doubt. Nor was there any doubt that her dancing was blatantly sexual. And all of that sexual energy was currently directed at him. He wasn't entirely certain he hadn't died and gone to heaven ... or hell, depending on how he looked at it. His current thoughts would dictate that the later was his most likely destination at the current time.

Problem was he knew she was drunk and there was no way he could take advantage of that. Still, her moves on the dance floor were taking him to heights of both ecstasy and frustration that he'd never known as she would rub against him, gyrate in front of him, run her hands over his body, nibble at his neck or look at him with those lust filled eyes.

He needed to get out of here. He needed to get out of here now! He should just vanish in a gust of wind. He could be gone so fast no one would even notice. And Lois wouldn't likely remember, given her state of intoxication. He could head straight for the Arctic and ...

But how could he leave her here like this? She was drunk. She was vulnerable. If he left now and then found out that someone with lower ethical standards had taken advantage of her ... No. He couldn't leave now.

Her hands began tugging at the front of his shirt.

He couldn't stay either. Reaching down quickly, he grabbed her hands, removing them from where they seemed to be puzzling over how to get under his shirt as if it were some great mystery they were intent on solving. "Listen," he said desperately, trying to get her attention back on his face instead of concentrating on how to free her hands as she seemed currently intent on doing, "why don't you have a seat over here?" He escorted her over to a nearby couch.

"I wanna dance," Lois objected.

"Just sit here," Clark said, ignoring her incredibly cute pout. "I'll be back in a minute." He forced her, gently but determinedly onto the couch.

She continued to pout.

"I'll be right back," he said, taking a step back.

"Promise?" she asked.

"Cross my heart," Clark responded, matching words to actions.

"I'll hold you to that, handsome," she responded.

Letting out a breath of relief, he turned and quickly surveyed the room. There must be someone around here who was in charge. He headed back across the dance floor, asking several people who was in charge. Mostly, he just got shrugs and brush-offs when people bothered to respond at all.

He spotted a young woman carrying a bowl of punch towards the bar. He quickly skirted around people to reach her, taking her burden.

"Thanks," she said gratefully. "If you just want to bring that over here ..."

He carried it to the counter and set it down before turning back to the woman. "Could you tell me who is in charge here?"

"I guess you could say I am. What's the problem?"

His eyebrows rose when he took note of the annoyance in her voice.

"I'm sorry," she said immediately. "I've just been hit with one problem after another and I ... Well, that's not important. So let's try this again, shall we? My name's Molly. What can I help you with?" She followed the words with an apologetic smile.

"There's a young woman over there who is really drunk and I'm concerned that she's going to get herself in trouble. I was

wondering if someone could help me direct her towards her friends or ...” He gestured with his hands, indicating his feeling of loss about exactly how to handle the situation.

Molly sighed. “Okay, well, why don’t you show me where she is and we’ll take it from there.”

After giving her a brief nod, he led her through the crowds across the dance floor. “She’s gone!” Clark exclaimed when he arrived back at the couch and discovered that Lois was no longer there. He turned quickly, scanning the room in desperation.

“Maybe her friends ...” Molly began.

“There!” Clark exclaimed, spotting her on the dance floor with another man, someone who definitely appeared to be taking full advantage of the sexual movements of the woman dancing with him. Without waiting for Molly, he pushed his way through the crowd, his eyes never leaving Lois.

“Hey, handsome,” Lois said, her eyes lighting up when she spotted him. “I was just danc ... dancing with ... What’s your name again?”

“It’s time to go, Lois,” Clark said.

“I don’t wanna go. I wanna dance,” Lois said, twirling around to demonstrate her point, only keeping her balance when Clark quickly reached out a hand to steady her.

“Hey, if the lady wants to dance ...” Lois’ current dance partner’s voice trailed off at a single look from Clark. A moment later, he was scuttling quickly away.

“Lois?” Molly asked in disbelief, coming up behind Clark.

“Hey, Mol!” Lois exclaimed, stumbling over to her friend and giving her a hug and a noisy kiss on the cheek. “I see you’ve met ... met handsome here.” She released one arm from around Molly, to wrap it around Clark’s waist. “I can keep him, right? I mean, I found him, after all, so I should be able to keep him.” She giggled. “I’ll keep him in my footlocker. Just gotta get the lock fixed.”

“What happened to you? I know you had a glass of wine, but ... I wasn’t gone that long, was I?” Molly reached over, doing up one of the buttons on Lois’ sweater to ensure she showed just a bit less cleavage — at least making her arrest for indecent exposure less likely.

“I’m having fun,” Lois explained. “You know what fun is, don’t you, Mol?” She turned her attention to Clark. “She’s such a stick-in-the-mud,” she confided to Clark.

“I’m a stick-in-the-mud!” Molly exclaimed, obviously overhearing Lois’ not-so-subtle comment.

“See! You admit it!” Lois said triumphantly, giggling as she buried her face against Clark’s chest.

“I take it you’re friends. Maybe you can get her home?” Clark asked hopefully.

“I don’t wanna go home,” Lois objected. “I wanna dance. Come on, let’s dance.” With that, she began to dance, although without releasing either Molly or Clark, Clark wasn’t entirely certain who she was attempting to dance with.

“I’m not sure I can handle this alone,” Molly said, her eyes silently pleading with him.

Clark glanced between Lois and Molly before giving in to the inevitable. He nodded.

“Then just give me a minute,” Molly said. “I need to grab our coats and let someone know I’ll be leaving.”

Getting Lois out of the house was easier than Clark had originally feared. The idea of taking Lois against her will did not sit well with Clark. But once Molly had managed to get Lois’ coat on her, she seemed to accept the idea that they were leaving.

“This is nice,” Lois said, tilting her head back and allowing the falling snow to hit her face.

“Woah, there!” Molly exclaimed, reaching over to steady her friend.

“Hey, Mol.” Lois wrapped her arm around Molly’s waist.

“You’re a good friend, you know.”

“I know,” Molly said, rolling her eyes in Clark’s direction. Clark couldn’t help but smile in response. Lois stumbled and Clark reached over to steady her.

“Yep,” Lois continued, wrapping an arm around Clark’s waist as well as they headed down the sidewalk. “You wouldn’t steal my story and the man of my dreams. Nope. Not you. You wouldn’t leave me to be threat ... threatened for something you were taking the credit for. You’re nothing like Linda King.”

“You were threatened?” Molly asked, coming to an abrupt halt.

“Yep.” Lois turned to Clark. “You aren’t a football player, are you, handsome?” she asked, taking her arm from around Molly’s waist to pat Clark’s chest. “Cause football players don’t like me much right now and you’re sort of a big guy so ...” Her hand left his chest to wrap around as much of his bicep as she could manage as if mapping out the size for herself. “You’re not, are you? Cause I’ve got to watch out for the football players. They even told me so.”

“I’ve never played football for the Devils,” Clark answered.

“Uhh ... See how he did that?” Lois said, turning to Molly. “He never said he doesn’t play football. Just that he doesn’t ... he doesn’t play for the Devils.”

“I see that,” Molly said tolerantly, tugging on Lois’ arm to get them moving again.

“Those are the things you pick ... pick up on when you’re a reporter.”

“An investigative reporter,” Molly added.

“An investi ... an investi ... a reporter,” Lois confirmed. “Yep. The best investi ... reporter ever. I’m so good I let my story get stolen by my friend. She said she was my friend, Mol!”

“I know.”

“You don’t do that to friends.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Oh god! I think I’m going to be sick,” Lois exclaimed suddenly, pushing away from Clark and Molly to rush over to the bushes at the edge of the sidewalk. Clark was beside her, keeping her from hurting herself when she fell to her knees and began retching. His hand rubbed slow, comforting circles on her back until she finally finished. “I don’t feel so good,” she said softly, taking the hanky that Clark handed to her to wipe her mouth. “I’m not sure I can go much further. Why don’t we just stay here?”

That comment was all it took to have Clark sweep her up in his arms. Her arms automatically wound their way around his neck as she buried her face against him. “Which way?” Clark asked Molly and a moment later the three of them were moving at a much brisker pace towards the dorms.

Clark paced the hall outside Lois’ dorm room. He hadn’t been told to leave, but when he’d set Lois down in her room and she’d begun stripping off her sweater, completely oblivious to his presence, he’d instantly bolted for the door. The amused grin Molly had given at his hasty departure had not been lost on Clark, either.

Still, he couldn’t leave. Not until he knew she was okay. He hadn’t dared look for himself — given what had caused him to flee the room in the first place. However, his hearing had told him that she had gotten sick again.

It had been a few minutes now since he’d last heard any noise coming inside the room, and he wrestled with the idea of knocking. It was possible, he supposed, that Molly didn’t know he was still here, hoping for an update. He raised his hand to knock and then immediately dropped it again and resumed pacing. What if Lois had just fallen asleep? What if his knocking woke her up again?

He turned suddenly when the door to Lois’ room opened.

Rushing over, he stopped and waited expectantly as Molly stepped out of the room, softly closing the door behind her.

"She's sleeping," Molly announced.

"What did she mean about being threatened by the football players?" Clark asked.

Molly shrugged. "All I know is that she wrote a story about football players cheating on their exams and another girl stole it and submitted it to the paper as her own. I guess I also know that some of the Beta Beta guys were pretty angry at Lois when they found out she was the one who discovered or ... oh, what's the expression they use in journalism? Broke?" When Clark nodded, she continued. "... broke the story. There was a lot of talk around campus that we were going to the Sugar Bowl this year. Anyway, the first time I heard about any threats from the football team was at the same time as you did.

"By the way, we've never actually been introduced. You know that I'm Molly. Molly Flynn actually, but I don't think you told me your name. Well, unless your name really is 'handsome,'" she added with a grin.

"I'm ..." Clark hesitated. Right now, he was just an anonymous individual who had helped Lois, and he guessed, Molly. But if he gave them his name ... "I'm Charlie King." Better safe than sorry.

"Nice to meet you, Charlie," Molly said, reaching out and shaking his hand. "And thanks for all your help tonight."

He was being dismissed. He glanced back at the door to the room, unsure. If she was being threatened ...

"Don't worry. I'll sit with her for a while. Make sure she's okay."

"And lock the door when you leave ... Before then, even. Keep the door locked when you're in there with her. After all, if someone is threatening ..." His voice trailed off and he felt a blush rise in his cheeks when he noticed the amused grin Molly was giving him.

"We'll be fine," Molly said, reaching out to touch his arm reassuringly. "Thank you, Charlie."

Giving the door to Lois' room one last look, he finally nodded. She was right. They'd be fine. And he still had a number of things he needed to do tonight.

Clark took a look around the room and nodded his approval. The Cozy Motel did not exactly live up to its name. The motel was almost falling apart. Peeling paint. Shutters that hung crooked on windows. Cracked concrete. Groaning floorboards. The rooms were grubby and the service left something to be desired. But what had he expected from a place where rooms could be rented by the hour, the day or the month?

However, there were three things this place had going for it. First, it was cheap. Second, the rooms were big. And third, it was located near the university — although why that should matter, he wasn't entirely sure. After all, he wasn't going to see her again. It would be stupid to tempt fate like that. Still, he had to admit he liked the idea of being close to her.

As for the condition of the room, he'd purchase a few cleaning supplies and whip it into shape in no time. Then, he'd make a trip to the alley behind the Daily Planet and bring the time machine back here.

He'd told the manager that he didn't require maid service. From the look the manager had given him in response, Clark suspected maid service wasn't something he would have gotten anyway. So he was certain he'd have the privacy he needed to fix the machine and head off to 1993 where he could persuade Lois not to go to the Congo.

And they had accepted a cash payment, with a deposit, not requiring ID. He was glad when he'd come on this trip that, not only had he thought to bring extra cash, but since the bank had just introduced a new series of bills in 1996, he'd taken the time

to ensure all his bills predated the change. It really wouldn't do for him to try to use one of the new bills, only to find himself arrested for using counterfeit money.

He had brought extra gold with him, however, since the time machine ran on gold, and he supposed if he did run out of money, he could take a trip up to some place like Dawson City in the northern Canada where one could still take gold dust into the local store and have it instantly converted to cash or use it to buy a sandwich, whichever.

Still, the Cozy Motel was absolutely perfect for his purposes.

The sun coming in through her window cut through Lois' head like a knife. She squeezed her eyes closed and lay there a moment, trying to get her bearings. Finally, she cracked open her eyes, cautiously this time, allowing herself a moment to adjust to the light before attempting to move.

The room seemed to spin around her, but she persisted, swinging her feet over the side of the bed. Once she'd made it far enough to sit on the side, she dropped her head into her hands and groaned. Had she ever felt this much like death warmed over?

What had happened anyway? She was in her room, obviously. But how had she gotten here? And why couldn't she remember?

She rubbed her temples, wishing the pain in her head would dull enough to allow her to think. Okay, so ... How had she gotten home? She concentrated for a moment. Nothing. Okay then ... What was the last thing she did remember? The party. Going to look for Molly and ... Had she found her? She concentrated for a moment. Again nothing.

So what had happened? She could remember having a glass of wine. And she hadn't had anything to eat all day. And she had drunk the vast majority of it all at once. Maybe ... But one glass? Could one glass have been enough to make her feel this bad the next morning? She felt as if she'd downed an entire brewery. Still, she wasn't exactly an expert when it came to drinking. So maybe ...

She shook her head, unable to make sense of it.

Well, she wasn't going to get answers sitting here all day so ... She forced herself to her feet. Instantly, her stomach turned over and she rushed for the bathroom, making it there just in time to empty the contents of her stomach into the bowl.

Clark stood for a long time staring at the phone in his hand. The loud beeping on the other end of the line informed him that he needed to hang up the phone before attempting his call. He quickly replaced it in the cradle. Since there was no phone in his room, he'd been forced to come out to use the pay phone outside the manager's office. Not a lot of privacy, but then he wasn't about to divulge national secrets or anything.

It wouldn't hurt, he told himself. It was just a call. It wasn't even a call to 'her.' He would just call Molly and find out how Lois was doing this morning. Nothing wrong with that. Just a simple phone call. What could it change?

Besides, if the fates hadn't wanted him to make this call, surely he wouldn't have found that quarter in his pocket. Nor would the page displaying Molly Flynn's phone number been in the tattered phone book hanging by a chain next to the phone. After all, most of the other pages had been torn out.

No. There really was no reason not to call.

Satisfied that his reasoning was sound, he picked up the phone and dialed the number. He could feel his heart pounding in his throat as he waited for Molly to answer.

"He ... hello," came the sleep filled voice over the line.

"Oh! I'm sorry. I'm calling too early! I should have thought ... I'll call back later. I'm sorry to have ..." He began bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet, suddenly anxious to hang up the phone and get away from there.

"Wait!"

Molly's exclamation caused Clark to stop in his verbal tracks, even as his physical movement came to a halt.

"Uhh ... Who is this?" Molly asked.

"It's Cl ... Charlie King."

"Charlie?" Molly asked, obviously still trying to make the connection. "Oh, right. Mr. Handsome from last night."

Clark felt himself blushing. He quickly redirected his mind to the reason for his call. "Listen, I'm obviously calling too early. I can call back later when you're awake."

"I'm awake now," Molly responded, a touch of amusement in her voice. "Why don't you just tell me why you're calling?"

"Oh, right. Well, I was just wondering how Lois is doing. But if you're just waking up, you obviously don't know. So really ... I should just call back later."

"Well, she was fine when I left. Sleeping like a baby. And don't worry, I made sure to lock the door," she added, causing his blush to deepen. "I suspect she'll be pretty hung over this morning. But I was planning to go over and see how she was. If she drank as much as she must have last night, she must be hurting quite a bit from what Linda did to her. I wish I'd realized that before ... Anyway, I figure she might want to talk it out. Hey, why don't you come with me when I go? You could see for yourself that she's ..."

"No, that's okay. It's not a good idea for me to ... Well, anyway, how about I call back later?"

"That's fine," she said.

"Okay, well I'll let you go back to whatever you were ... Or well back to sleep I guess."

"That's okay. I'm awake now," Molly said.

"Sorry," Clark mumbled. He could hear Molly softly laugh on the other end of the line.

"That's okay, Charlie. I'll talk to you later."

Molly had just finished showering and dressing and was on her way to the closet to get her coat when the door to the sorority house opened. Turning to look, Molly watched Lois enter the house and look around.

"Well, look who's back in the land of the living," Molly said. "You look horrible. Want a little hair of the dog that bit you?"

"No!" Lois exclaimed, groaning immediately as the pain of her own exclamation sliced through her head. "I'm never drinking anything ever again."

Molly laughed. "That's what happens when you don't know your limit."

"One glass of wine, Molly. I only had one glass. I guess ... I drank it too fast or ... maybe because I hadn't slept much ... or didn't have any food in my stomach ... or ... I don't know."

Molly took Lois' coat and hung it up in the closet. "Trust me on this, sweetie. You had a hell of a lot more than one glass. Maybe you only clearly remember drinking one glass, but there is no way you only had one glass of wine last night."

"How much of a fool did I make of myself?" Lois asked, cringing slightly as she waited for the answer.

"Do you remember 'Handsome'?"

"Who? Or is that what?"

A knock on the door diverted the attention of the women. Molly stepped past Lois to open the door. "Rye, Sean, Craig?"

"Morning, Mol. We figured you girls might need some help cleaning up from last night's party," Ryan said. "Lois," he added flatly when he saw who was standing next to Molly.

"Ryan," Lois responded just as flatly.

Molly sighed, but didn't comment. Instead she gestured the men into the sorority house. "Thanks for coming. Some of the girls have already started in the backroom. If you want to join them, I'm sure they'll have jobs for you."

They waited as the men removed their shoes and hung up

their coats before walking towards the back.

"Why don't we go to the kitchen?" Molly asked.

"Maybe we should ... " Lois gestured towards the room the men had gone into.

Molly shook her head. "I'm sure they've got it covered. And I suspect you could use a cup of coffee. Strong coffee. We can talk in there." She gestured towards the kitchen. "The girls made a fresh pot of coffee just a little while ago."

"Yes. Please," Lois said, following Molly into the kitchen.

The women were just settling into chairs at the table with their coffee when Molly spoke. "Please tell me that you at least remember 'Handsome'."

"You mentioned 'Handsome' before," Lois said cautiously.

"Why do I suddenly feel like I'm not going to like this story? So ... tell me. I take it 'Handsome' must be a man."

Molly nodded. "You really don't remember?"

Lois shook her head.

"Too bad. At least you picked the right name for him 'cause this guy was hot."

"Hot," Lois repeated.

Molly nodded. "You introduced him to me as 'Handsome' — which was quite appropriate I thought. He looked like he'd just stepped off the cover of GQ — wearing this leather jacket that was absolutely to die for. And you were all over him."

"Oh, god," Lois groaned, burying her head in her hands.

"I've got to admit, you've got pretty good taste in men when you're drunk. Better than when you're sober, actually."

"Don't tell me I ... Molly, what did I do? Please tell me I didn't ... Oh, god. Molly, is he the one who took me home? What if he ... we ... I mean, I wasn't wearing much when I woke up this morning. What if he ... I mean, what about AIDS? Did we use protection? Oh, god, what if ..."

"Would you relax? You two didn't do anything you couldn't tell your mother about, okay. Or ... well, I'm not sure you'd want to tell your mother this story. But you don't have to worry about AIDS or anything like that. He was a perfect gentleman."

"Maybe he was when you saw him. But if he went back to my room with me ..."

"We went back to your room with you," Molly interrupted.

"When he realized how drunk you were, he came to me, looking for some of your friends to take you home. I told him that you didn't have any friends, but offered to help anyway." Then, as if realizing that after what had just happened with Linda, that joke was probably in bad taste, she gave Lois an apologetic smile before continuing. "Given how drunk you were, I asked for his help, so he came with me. It's a good thing he did, too. If he hadn't, I don't know what I would have done when you practically collapsed after throwing up in the bushes."

"Oh, god," Lois groaned, again burying her head in her hands. "So ... what happened — exactly?"

"Well, let's see. Before or after you asked if you could take him home and keep him in your footlocker?"

"Oh, god," Lois responded.

Molly laughed. "Or maybe you're wanting to know about when you ran your hands over his chest, or felt up his biceps or wrapped your arm around his waist or started to strip out of your sweater while he was still in your room or ..."

"You're enjoying this entirely too much," Lois complained.

"Hey, I'm not the one who got drunk. So tell me something." Her voice suddenly became much more serious. "You said something about the football players threatening you ..."

Lois' response was cut off when the door to the kitchen opened and a man entered who was wearing a leather jacket and could only be described as tall, dark and hand ... Her eyes shot to Molly.

"Lois Lane," Molly said with a grin, "meet Handsome."

"Oh god," Lois exclaimed, dropping her head back into her

hands as Molly's laughter filled the room.

He'd thought it made sense at the time. He really had. When he hadn't been able to find a quarter to call Molly, taking a quick trip over here had seemed like the logical solution. What could possibly go wrong? Molly had been going over to Lois' place to check on her. If she wasn't back yet, he could just wait until she returned. No harm. No foul.

So what was Lois doing sitting at the kitchen table with Molly? His heart rate shot into overdrive. He had to leave. Get out of here. He'd been spotted by the enemy. Down periscope! Dive! Dive! Dive!

"I ... uhh ... knocked," Clark said, gesturing in the direction of the front door.

Depth charges were being set to be deployed the instant they got a fix on him, explosions that would send ripples more powerful than any nuclear explosion tearing apart his world.

"Someone let me in," he continued cautiously. "They told me just to come on in here. But if it's not a good time ..."

He heard the ping of the radar as they searched for him. Even the slightest mistake could give away his position. He began backing towards the door to the kitchen, anxious to make his escape. Set maximum down angle. Engines full. Give me everything you've got. Retreat. Retreat. Retreat.

"No, no," Molly said, rising to her feet. "I don't believe the two of you have actually been properly introduced. Lois Lane this is Charlie King."

Lois raised her face to give him an embarrassed smile. It was her eyes that did him in. Stopped him in his tracks. Caused the engine to stall out his retreat. He was trapped.

"You wouldn't happen to be any relation to Linda King, would you?" she asked warily.

"Relat ... No. No. Not at all," Clark said. Then, realizing that she wouldn't know that he would have any reason to know who Linda King was, he continued. "Or at least, I don't think I have any relations by that name. And, besides, I'm not related to anyone in Metropolis. Well, if she is from Metropolis, of course." Why had he chosen the name Charlie King anyway? Maybe that was because it had been his usual undercover name before he'd even met Linda King. But why hadn't he thought about the connection to Linda King? Maybe he could go back and change it. Tell her that Molly had misheard him. Tell her his last name was really Williams or Smith or ...

"Listen," she said, seeming satisfied with his denial of any relation to Linda King, bringing his internal attempts to find another name to an abrupt end. "I understand I need to thank you for your help yesterday."

"It wasn't a problem."

"I'm just a little embarrassed because ... I don't usually get that drunk. I don't even really know how I got so drunk. I would have sworn I only had one glass of wine, but I guess I must have had more — given Molly's description how I was behaving."

"Either that or someone spiked your drink," Clark said.

"What?" both Lois and Molly asked in unison.

"Why would someone put alcohol in an alcoholic beverage?" Molly asked.

"No ... not alcohol," Clark said. "Date rape drugs. Maybe someone put a date rape drug in your wine."

"What are you talking about? What's a date rape drug?" Lois asked, suddenly sitting up straighter, her eyes more focused.

Clark suddenly heard the alarms again. They'd determined his depth and were preparing to fire. We have a solution light, sir. Fire! Number one fired electrically, sir. All fish running hot, straight and normal. Time to impact ...

Still, how was it possible the thought of someone slipping a date rape drug into her drink hadn't occurred to ... Oh crap. This was 1987. Was it possible that he, given that he was from ten

years in the future, knew about a danger to young women that hadn't been well known, or maybe even a problem, back in 1987?

"I'm probably way off base here," Clark immediately said, backtracking as quickly as he could. Evasive maneuvers. Fire decoys. "It might not even be a problem here. Just ignore me. I get these weird ideas sometimes. Anyway, I just stopped by to make sure you were okay. Glad to see that you are ..."

"Please, Charlie," Lois said, cutting him off.

His voice trailed off at her soft plea. She looked as if she really needed to know what he was talking about. And immediately, he knew he'd lost. Blow negative. Surface. Surface. Surface. Surrender was now the only option. He slowly nodded.

"Why don't you have a seat?" Lois gestured to an empty chair.

He seemed powerless to resist as he found himself going where she wanted him to go — the vanquished, hoping for mercy from the victor.

"Coffee?" Molly asked, going over to the coffee machine.

When he nodded, she handed him a mug and then proceeded to top off all their cups. "Oh, and it seems someone brought donuts. Anyone want one?"

Clark nodded again. After all, perhaps this was their version of a final meal before he was sent to his death.

Lois watched Charlie fiddle nervously as he put three spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee. It made no sense. What did he have to be nervous about?

"So what's this date rape drug thing you were talking about?"

Lois asked, pushing her questions about Charlie's nerves to the back of her mind — for the moment.

"It's just what it sounds like. Simply put, a guy might put one of these drugs in a woman's drink to intoxicate her. Often it's to make it more likely that she will ..."

His voice trailed off.

"Put out?"

Charlie nodded. "Willingly or otherwise. Of course, it could also be done by a woman, putting it in a man's drink so that she can steal his wallet."

"Why is it those two things don't seem quite equal?" Molly asked.

Lois snorted. "So what types of drugs do this?"

"Well, I did some research on it for my job and there are three that are used most often. Rohypnol, GHB or gamma hydroxybutyric and ketamine."

"Never heard of any of them," Lois said. "So you think that someone gave me one of these date rape drugs?"

Charlie shrugged. "What exactly do you remember from last night? Was there a chance for someone to put a drug in your drink? That might tell you if it was even possible, 'cause like I said, it might not even be a possibility here so ..."

He shrugged again before taking a bite of his donut, seeming to savor it as if it were his last meal.

"Well, I poured you a glass of wine from a previously unopened bottle, and I didn't put anything in it, so what happened then?" Molly asked.

"Linda came over," Lois said. "I suppose she might think doing something like that would be funny, but ..."

"I don't think I'd even poured the wine before she left," Molly said. "So I don't think it could have been her. I gave you the wine, poured myself a glass of punch, realized someone had put alcohol in it and ... You were going to find us a seat while I dealt with the punch issue."

Lois nodded. "Yeah. I found a table and a number of people came over. Joe and Debbie. They wanted to warn me to watch out because the football players had found out that even though Linda submitted the story, I was the one who had uncovered it."

"Could one of them ... Joe or Debbie ..."

Charlie began. "They wouldn't have any reason to. But even if they had

wanted to, the glass was sitting in front of me on the table the whole time.”

“Did you look away, or maybe someone or something distracted you?” Charlie asked again.

“No. And they were only there for a couple of minutes.”

“Okay so ... what happened then?”

Lois thought for a moment. “Teddy. Teddy came over.”

“Who’s Teddy?” Molly asked.

“A guy from my gymnastics class. Harmless as a fly. It couldn’t have been Teddy. Besides, I don’t think he would have had a chance because that’s when Donald Landover and his ... No wait. Bob Stafford came over at some point. Not sure if it was before or after Landover.”

“What did that creep want?” Molly asked.

“To warn me to quit telling people that I was the one who got the story about the football players. He made some comment about me needing to get laid, too. Said something about it taking the pole out of my ...” She shot Charlie an embarrassed look. “Well, anyway ...”

“What about opportunity? Did he have a chance to put something in your drink?” Charlie asked.

Lois thought for a moment before letting out a breath of frustration. After a moment, she shrugged.

“What about Landover?” Molly asked. “What happened when he came over?”

“He and a few of his thugs ... or whatever they were. They had no necks. They came over when I was talking to Teddy. Hey, I did jump up once when one of them started pushing Teddy around. Landover came up behind me ... Still, there wasn’t a lot of time.”

“How long does it take to drop a pill ... or what would it be?” Molly asked.

“A pill, powder, a liquid ... It depends,” Charlie said, wiping his hands free of powdered sugar.

“I suppose there may have been time. Landover did make some sexual comments related to something Teddy said about how flexible I am in gymnastics.” She kept her eyes on Molly when she made the last comment. “Landover told me to watch my back. They were obviously really mad at me.”

“What happened then?” Molly asked. “Did they just leave?”

“No. Actually Ryan Wiley came over with some Beta Beta guys and told them to back off.”

“Really?” Molly said, sounding impressed.

“What happened then?” Charlie asked. “Did these guys just leave or did they stay and talk?”

“Well, I was sort of surprised,” Lois said. “I mean, Ryan and I had quite an argument earlier in the day. And I don’t think it’s any secret that we’ve never really liked each other. So I thanked him and well, he said something about not caring if Landover got his revenge. Sounded almost like he hoped he would.”

“Then why did he step in?” Charlie asked.

“Because he didn’t want them turning Molly’s party into a brawl.”

“Are you sure you didn’t misunderstand him?” Molly asked.

Lois looked over at her friend to see that all the color had drained out of Molly’s face.

“I’m sure, Mol,” Lois said softly, wondering once again what exactly her friend’s relationship was with Ryan. “He didn’t do it to save me. He did it to save your party.”

“But ...” Molly couldn’t seem to bring herself to complete her question.

“Then what happened?” Charlie asked, breaking the awkward silence.

“Uhh ...” Lois said, trying to get her mind back on track. “Linda’s brother.”

“Linda’s brother?” Molly asked. “Which one?”

“Her step-brother — Russell ... I can’t think of his last name

right now. He was drunk. I mean really drunk. Demanded to know why I’d broken my date with him last week. Then the idiot spilled his beer all over me. That’s when I decided I’d had enough. I finished my wine and set out to find you.”

“Go back to the part where he spilled his beer on you. What did you do then?” Charlie asked.

Lois’ eyes went wide. “I went over to a nearby table to grab some napkins and clean myself up. I wasn’t gone long, but I left my wine sitting back on my table. When I came back, Russell had left. So I finished my wine and ... Charlie,” she said, suddenly reaching out and grabbing his forearm, “do these drugs have any sort of taste to them?”

“Not really ... so far as I know. That’s one of the reasons they’re used.”

“Damn. I really thought I was on to something there.”

“What?” both Charlie and Molly said.

“Well, I thought my wine tasted salty. I remember thinking it was weird.”

“Salty?” Charlie asked.

Lois nodded.

“I remember reading that GHB tasted salty, depending on what type of drink it was added to.”

“What type of work do you do, Charlie?” Molly suddenly asked.

“I ... uhh ... Nothing too exciting,” Charlie responded, suddenly looking very uncomfortable.

Lois tilted her head to the side, her reporter’s instincts, as she liked to call them, tingling at the obvious prevarication. “Where are you from, Charlie? You said something like ... maybe date rape drugs weren’t a problem around here?”

“Oh, well ... I’m just sort of passing through.” He glanced at his wrist. His watchless wrist. “Anyway, I really do need to get going. It’s getting later than I thought. So ...”

He rose to his feet.

“Wait!” Lois said, worried that she had frightened him off.

“Before you go, can I just ask you a couple of more questions? About these date rape drugs,” she clarified to his reticent look.

“Uhh ... Okay,” he said cautiously, but didn’t resume his seat. “What do you want to know?”

“Could you write down the names of those drugs for me? I thought I just forgot how much I had to drink. I need to know if that’s what happened or if someone spiked my drink. And to do that, I think I should make a trip to the hospital to see if they can test for those drugs.”

“They can,” Charlie responded. “Just ...” He looked around for something to write on.

Lois pulled her reporter’s notebook out and handed it to him, along with a pen. For some reason, he suddenly looked amused. There was something about that look that tugged at Lois’ memory. “Do I know you?” she asked.

“Well, you were all over him last night and we’ve been talking now for quite a while,” Molly said with amusement. “I should hope you know him. Or is this some sort of ongoing, short-term memory loss thing we’ve got going on?”

No. Last night wasn’t the reason he looked so familiar to her. She had absolutely no memory of last night. It was something about his eyes, the way they crinkled around the corners when he was amused. And the glasses ... Now that she thought about it, she was sure she’d seen those glasses somewhere before.

“I don’t think so,” Charlie said, shifting uncomfortably.

She was right. She knew she was. She had met him previously. But she let it go. Right now there were other questions that were more urgent. She’d come back to that other matter later. “By the way, how did we meet ... last night,” she added when he looked slightly uncomfortable. His expression cleared immediately, almost as if relieved to stay on the issue at hand.

Charlie quickly explained how they had met the previous night. She was being escorted out of the house by a couple of men. She'd wanted to go back inside to dance, but they insisted it was time for her to go home. At the time, he'd thought she was just being taken home by friends because she'd gotten too drunk. They'd disappeared into the night when she'd turned her attention on Charlie, wanting him to dance.

Lois' eyes widened as she suddenly realized how close she may have come to having those date rape drugs fulfill their function. "Sounds like I owe you a lot more than I thought I did," she said when he had finished. "Would you recognize those guys again if you saw them?"

Charlie's eyes narrowed as he tried to recall. "Maybe. But I was sort of distracted by this beautiful woman who wanted to dance," he said, his voice softening.

Lois could feel the heat rising in her cheeks.

"Anyway, I should really ..." Charlie gestured towards the door.

"Is there some way I can get in touch with you," Lois said. "I mean," she continued, when his eyebrows rose at the sound of panic in her voice. No not, panic. Concern, maybe. Yes, concern. Concern was good. "I mean if I need to ask you any more questions. Or if I need you to identify the men you saw with me."

"Uhh ..." He looked uncomfortable again. "I really don't have a place where I can be reached. And, like I said, I really don't think I could identify them anyway. And I'm not expecting to be here that much longer," he added, as if glad to have finally found an excuse not to tell her how to reach him.

"Oh, okay," Lois said, trying to keep her suspicions out of her voice. "Well, anyway, thanks for all your help."

She watched thoughtfully when, after a brief nod of acknowledgment, he turned and practically fled the kitchen.

"Do you want me to give you a ride to the hospital?" Molly asked as the door closed behind Charlie.

"Huh ... Oh, right! Yes! Let's go!" Without waiting for Molly to respond, Lois jumped to her feet and began dragging Molly towards the door.

"What's the hurry?" Molly asked, trying to keep her feet beneath her.

Clark was lost in thought as he walked back to his motel. He'd chosen to walk for a number of reasons. First, he thought it was probably best if he used his powers as little as possible while in this time. Less chance of changing the past that way. Second, it was only a short distance and it was a beautiful day. But most of all, he wanted a chance to review everything about that encounter, hoping he hadn't done something that might change the time line.

He really shouldn't have gone over in the first place. Or when he had run into Lois, he should have just made his inquiries and left. He never should have brought up a possibility she obviously hadn't thought of. But surely that small slip shouldn't change the past. Should it?

He'd been uncomfortable with the questions about where he was from and what he did. The less she actually knew about him, the better. And he thought she'd been satisfied ... or at least distracted enough that she hadn't pursued that line of thought. And since he would never have contact with her again — at least in 1987 — that should be that. No damage done. She might have questions, might even puzzle over it for a while, but since she would have no way to follow up those questions, it wasn't as if it could make any difference to the time line.

When she'd asked if she had met him before, he'd felt a moment of panic. What if she remembered the incident from when she was nine? She would know everything. That he could travel in time and that he could fly. Still, it had been over ten years ago and, given that he had flown, she must have eventually

dismissed the incident as the product of the over-active imagination of a nine year old child.

No, he was fairly confident that no damage had been done. Now all he needed to do was to direct his attention to fixing the time machine so that he could get out of this time and on to where he needed to go.

"Pull over. Pull over. Pull over," Lois hissed frantically.

"Why?" Molly asked even as she followed Lois' instructions. "There he is."

"Who?" Molly asked before scanning the street in front of them. "Hey, isn't that ..."

"Charlie," Lois completed. "Just let him get a bit farther ahead before pulling out again. We don't want him to know we're following him."

"We're following him?" Molly asked. "I thought we were going to the hospital."

"Once I find out where he's going."

"Why? Are you thinking that he might have had something to do with what happened to you — possibly trying to throw you off by pretending to help?"

"No, of course not. I'm pretty sure he's telling the truth about that."

"Then why are we following?" Even as she spoke, Charlie rounded a corner. Molly checked her mirror before pulling back onto the street, carefully turning the corner after him.

"I just want to see where he's going. Didn't you notice how nervous he got whenever we'd ask him something personal?"

"Maybe he's a private person," Molly said as she again pulled over so that they wouldn't be spotted. "People are entitled to private lives, Lois."

After a moment of silence, Lois spoke again. "Sort of like when someone keeps her relationship with a man a secret from her friends?"

"How did you know?" Molly gasped.

"Why, Mol? Why didn't you tell me about you and Ryan? And, for that matter, what exactly is happening between you and Ryan?"

"Rye and I have been ... dating, I guess."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"That was ..." Molly's voice trailed off when Lois tapped her shoulder and pointed to where Charlie was disappearing around the next corner. "That was his idea," Molly said as she pulled out into traffic to follow. "He said it's hard enough to start a relationship without worrying about what other people think."

Lois bit her tongue when the implications of that sank in. She and Ryan didn't like each other. Neither had made any secret of that fact. He had to mean her. Or ... did he? Was there some other reason that Ryan might not have wanted people to know about his relationship with Molly?

"Where'd he go?" Molly asked as they turned the corner, bringing Lois' mind back to the task at hand.

Charlie had disappeared. She glanced around quickly. "There!" she said.

Spotting him going into the Cozy Motel parking lot, Molly quickly pulled the car to the side of the road. They watched in silence as he walked across the parking lot of the dingy motel, stopping in front of room seventeen.

"Did Ryan really say that he was only stopping the football players so that they wouldn't disrupt my party?" Molly asked, breaking the silence.

"He said they had his blessing to get their revenge, only not at your party."

Molly said nothing and Lois held her tongue — something she wasn't good at. Still, it was obvious that Molly was thinking, troubled by the revelation. Maybe if Lois didn't say anything, Molly would realize that Ryan wasn't good enough for her. Using

levels of self-control she hadn't known she possessed, she changed the subject.

"Okay, I guess I know now where Charlie is staying," Lois said when Charlie opened the door to room seventeen and entered, closing the door behind him. "Why don't we head out to the hospital? Or ... better yet. Let's go see if my doctor can see me this morning?"

Clark walked into his room, shut and locked the door before unzipping his leather jacket. He had only taken one arm out of his jacket when another headache hit. He dropped to his knees, the jacket half on, half off as the headache spread from his head to every other part of his body.

He'd been wrong. This didn't feel as if he was being torn apart by wild horses. This felt as if someone was taking all the molecules in his body and rearranging them. He hurt everywhere. From the top of his head to the tips of his toes. Pain, like he'd never known, coursed through his body. If he hadn't known there were no nerve endings in his hair, he'd have sworn even his hair hurt.

He could hear a strangled whimper and after a moment of confusion realized the sound had come from him. Curling up in a fetal position on the floor, he struggled against the darkness that seemed to beckon him.

Still, as with the last time this had happened, soon the pain began to fade. The soreness in his limbs still lingered when he finally picked himself up off the floor and took a seat on the side of the bed.

Maybe he'd work on repairing the time machine later. Right now what he needed most was some sleep. Without even bothering to remove his shoes, he collapsed back on the bed and closed his eyes.

"I'm not sure I understand." Dr. Maria Chives looked at Lois in confusion.

"I need to have a drug test done, Doctor Maria," Lois said to her doctor, a woman doctor who her father had recommended when she'd gotten old enough to be uncomfortable having her father for a doctor. "I want you to check for these drugs." She handed her doctor the page from her reporter's notebook where Charlie had written down the names of the drugs.

"I understand that, but ... Why? I mean ... this one?" Lois looked to where Doctor Maria was pointing at ketamine. "It's a hospital grade anesthesia. But I think it's more common to see it used for performing emergency operations in a war zone. Or ... Well, it's common to see veterinarians use it, but why would you even think you might have it in your system?"

"I was told these are the three most common types of date rape drugs."

"What? What are date rape drugs?"

"You've never heard of them?" Lois asked, surprised. It was conceivable Charlie might have heard of them being used somewhere else in the country when Lois wasn't aware of them in Metropolis. But for her doctor not to have heard anything about them ... Who was Charlie, anyway?

"Never. I can imagine what they are supposedly for, though — considering the name. So what's the scam? How are they used? Are they sold as some sort of recreational drug and then, after the woman is under the influence, she's raped?"

"No. Apparently, the guy slips them in the girl's drink without her knowledge. Afterwards, she just thinks she must have had too much to drink. She might not even know that she was raped, making it more likely that the guy will walk away scott free."

"You think this happened to you?" Doctor Maria asked, watching Lois carefully.

"Well, sort of, but ..."

"When was this?"

"Last night."

"Okay, the first thing we need to do is a rape kit. Now, it looks as if you've already showered today, but we might get lucky. You may have heard of this new DNA procedure that allows us to positively identify an individual with blood, hair or semen ... Things like that. So we really need to check for samples. It would also be a good if you collected any clothes you were wearing last night. And then we need to put in a call to the police to ..."

"No, no, no, no. You misunderstood me. I don't think I was raped. I don't think it actually got that far. I just need to know if somebody slipped something in my drink."

Her doctor's expression relaxed slightly. "Maybe you should start at the beginning," she suggested.

Lois nodded before filling the doctor in on what she knew and what she suspected. "So," Lois finally concluded, "if these drugs have shown up at New Troy University, I think it's important that girls be warned not to leave their drinks unattended."

"I agree," Doctor Maria said. "But let's worry about you first, shall we? Now, I know you don't think you were raped. And I agree it does sound as if you managed to avoid that — even if only by a hair. But I still want to do an exam. I also want to test for STDs — particularly AIDs."

Involuntarily Lois shivered. AIDs was the one term that could strike fear into the heart of any college student these days. She nodded her agreement. Better to know for sure.

A few minutes later, she was remembering vividly just how much she disliked this type of exam. She noticed Doctor Maria smile when, finishing much quicker than Lois had expected, she pulled off her rubber gloves with a snap.

"What?" Lois asked suspiciously.

"Well, I can say unequivocally that you were not raped. Congratulations. You're still a virgin."

Lois collapsed back onto the examining table, closing her eyes as relief swept over her. She hadn't thought she'd been raped, but to get confirmation ... It was as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

"Hey," Molly said, coming into the study at the sorority house to see Lois, books spread out around her, a notepad in front of her as she scribbled on it. "So this is where you disappeared to."

"Hi, Mol," Lois responded, looking up from the books. "Sorry I haven't been more of a help today with clean up."

Molly waved her off. "Personally, considering everything, I think what you're doing could be of more benefit to every girl in this house than washing tables and straightening furniture."

Molly stepped into the room.

"Could you close the door behind you?" Lois asked. "It's just that after what happened with Linda ..."

She shrugged. "Oh, of course." Molly closed the door before walking over to where Lois was half hidden behind stacks of open books. "I haven't said anything to the girls. And I won't unless you give me the okay. But I have to say that I think we need to say something soon."

"I know," Lois responded. "If this wasn't just an attack on me ..."

"... then we've got a real problem." Molly took a moment to mentally review her words. "Not that I'm saying that someone slipping drugs into your drink isn't a problem. It's just ..."

"I know what you mean. And I agree."

"Have you heard back from Doctor Maria yet about your drug test?"

Lois shook her head. "She said she'd do what she could to put a rush on it, but I think she was concerned about whether all

of those tests were even available.”

“So you decided to ... while you wait ... take up a new major?” Molly asked, her eyebrows going up when she picked up a big book off the pile and read the title. “Klein’s Medical Drug Reference.”

“You got me. I’ve suddenly decided to give up journalism to go medical school. My father’s thrilled.”

“Yeah, right,” Molly said skeptically. “So why have you taken down every medical textbook every medical student has left at the house over the years or every alumni has donated?”

“Not to mention the journals and medical books Doctor Maria lent me. Or the ones that I picked up from the university’s medical library,” Lois added.

“Uhh ... so that’s what you were doing with my car this afternoon. My guess is that you’ve suddenly got a hankering to find out everything you can about those date rape drugs Charlie told us about.” She sat down on the other side of the table. “So ... how can I help?”

“This isn’t your problem, Mol.”

“No? We learned today that all of us might be vulnerable to a new way to attack women. How exactly is that not my problem?”

Lois smiled at her friend.

“So, Lois, what do you want me to do?”

“These are the books I’ve gone through.” Lois gestured to the larger stack. “These are the ones I have to go.”

Molly reached over, picking up the pad of paper sitting in front of Lois to see a few lines of writing. “This is it?” she asked in disbelief when she looked at pitiful amount of information Lois had obtained. “This is all you got by going through all those books?”

“That’s it. Nothing, Molly. Or almost nothing has been written about these drugs. Certainly nothing that talks about them being used to facilitate rape. So how did Charlie know about them?”

Molly looked at the notes, focusing on what was actually written.

“Rohyphnol ... trade name for flunitram or flunitraxepam ... or however you pronounce it ... is used for short-term treatment of insomniacs ... ” She looked up at Lois. “A sleeping pill?” she asked.

“Seems so.”

“... in France and the United Kingdom ... ” She looked back at Lois. “No mention of it being used in the United States?”

“Not that I’ve found so far.”

Molly glanced back at the list. “GHB or gamma hydro ... ” She stared at the rest of the word in disbelief. “I guess I can understand why they call it GHB. Uhh.. It’s also used to treat insomnia.”

“But that’s not the best part. Read on.”

“... clinical depression ... alcoholism ... narcolepsy ... ”

Suddenly, Molly’s head snapped up and she looked at Lois.

Lois nodded, knowing what had caught Molly’s attention.

“... improving athletic performance and enhancing muscle definition,” Molly finished before returning her attention to Lois. “You’re thinking ... football players.”

“I think they’re the most likely suspects to have access to this stuff.”

Molly nodded, deep in thought. “I still think you should be careful not to narrow it down to the football players just yet. There are lots of other candidates.”

“You’re right,” Lois said. “Just because they might have access to GHB doesn’t automatically mean they’re the culprits here. There’s Russell ... Linda’s brother. I turned him down. He might have thought this was the way to ... convince me otherwise. And he was left alone with my drink when I left the table. And I suppose Stafford wasn’t too pleased with me.”

“And Ryan,” Molly added quietly.

The silence following Molly’s addition was almost palpable.

“Are you okay, Mol?” Lois asked softly.

Molly gave her a wobbly smile. “Not really. But I guess your comment has got me thinking that maybe I don’t know Rye nearly as well as I thought I did. The guy I thought I knew would never have said what he did to you. And thank you for not rubbing it in. I know you’ve wanted to. I appreciate your restraint.”

Lois nodded briefly, unsure what to say in response.

Molly looked back down at the paper. “Oh, look. You found potential side-effects for GHB. Euphoria, disinhibition, enhanced sensuality and empathogenesis. Well, that certainly fits with your behavior last night. Oh and ‘may induce nausea’ — well, I can certainly attest, as can the bushes outside, that you experienced that one. So what else? Dizziness, drowsiness, agitation, visual disturbances, depressed breathing, amnesia, unconsciousness and death. Wonderful.”

The phone ringing interrupted their research..

“I gave Doctor Maria this number,” Lois said, jumping up and grabbing the phone. “Hello,” she said into the mouthpiece. “Hi, Doctor Maria,” she added when she heard the person on the other end of the line. “Yes, this is Lois.”

Clark studied the blueprints for the time machine with growing frustration. The part of the plan he’d spilled coffee on appeared to be the part that dealt with the controls for determining the time one traveled to, all right. But even using every visual power available to him, he still couldn’t see what he’d done wrong. There had to be something in there that he had missed. A time stabilizer or something. But without understanding the theory behind how the time machine even worked, how was he to figure out what exactly was missing?

He needed more information. The theory behind the machine maybe. Problem was, Wells wasn’t here to explain it to him. Too bad Wells hadn’t left behind a book explaining his theories about ...

Clark’s thought trailed off and suddenly he was sitting up straighter.

Of course! Maybe Wells had done exactly that! It had been years since Clark had read H.G. Wells’ book called The Time Machine. Yes, it was fiction. But Wells had based the concept on something he was already doing — traveling in time. So any theories about time travel in that book ...

Clark jumped off the bed and grabbed his jacket. The university library was only a few blocks from here. He could be there, read The Time Machine and be back here to fix the machine in no time.

“Well, that was interesting,” Lois said as she hung up the phone.

“What? Did she find something?”

“Yes and no. Yes, the lab found GHB in my system but no ketamine. As for Rohyphnol ... They don’t even have a test for it here in the States. If I want my blood tested for Rohyphnol, she’s going to have to contact a hospital in Europe to send a test over.”

“So what did you tell her?”

“Not to bother. I think I have my answer. If I tested positive for GHB, that must have been what was slipped in my drink and why slip two drugs in my drink? Besides, isn’t GHB the drug Charlie said tasted salty?”

“I think so.”

“Doctor Maria did say something else interesting, though. She said she asked around, made a few calls to colleagues and even a police officer friend of hers and none of them have ever heard the expression ‘date rape drugs.’”

Molly’s eyebrows rose. “So how did Charlie ... ”

“That’s exactly what I was wondering.”

"Well, maybe he was in Europe recently. It might explain about the Rohypnol. Maybe it's something they're having a problem with there."

"Maybe," Lois said, rising to her feet. "Either way, I'm going to find out."

"You're going to talk to him?"

Lois nodded. "Do you want to come?"

"Are you okay to go alone? You don't think he'll be a threat to you if you start asking all these questions, do you? I mean, one logical explanation for him knowing about these drugs is if he was the one who slipped something in your drink."

"True. But I don't believe that. After all, he didn't need to come looking for you last night. And I know I wasn't raped ... Why drug me if he wasn't going to take advantage of it? And why put me onto the topic in the first place if he was involved?"

"To get close to you, maybe."

"If that were true, he wouldn't keep running away. No, Mol. He might not be happy with my questions ..."

"Or the fact that you trailed him to find out where he was staying," Molly added.

"Or that. But he's not going to hurt me."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Okay, then. I'll stay here. Ryan's coming over this evening."

That caught Lois' attention.

"We'd planned to get together today before all of this happened," Molly said. "And, don't worry. I'm not going to mention any of this to him. After all, if he is the one who spiked your drink ..."

Lois put a comforting hand on Molly's arm as a tear leaked out of the corner of Molly's eye. Molly quickly brushed it away.

"So what are you going to do?" Lois asked.

Molly shrugged. "If he did spike your drink, then if I break up with him now, he'll suspect we're on to him. But ... I don't know. I'll come up with some sort of excuse. A headache, or something."

She gave Lois a wobbly smile at the attempt at a joke, which also served to notify Lois what Molly meant when she said Ryan was coming over. They weren't planning to go out. They were staying in.

Her heart ached for her friend with this new evidence of the seriousness of Molly's relationship with Ryan. Because unlike Linda, Molly just wasn't the type to engage in sexual activity with a man she wasn't serious about.

The sun had just set over Metropolis when Lois arrived across the street from the Cozy Motel.

Slipping back into the shadows, Lois waited. If Charlie was inside that room, he would have to turn the light on soon. Given that the curtains were drawn, it must be even darker inside. Part of her hoped he was there. Another part told her that it might be smart if she searched through his stuff, got some idea of what he might be hiding, before confronting him directly. Either way, she wanted to know which approach she would be using before crossing the street.

As she waited, her thoughts drifted. The look on his face, around his eyes in particular, when he'd been amused ... What was it about those eyes that had seemed so familiar to her? Why was it that she felt safe in his presence? Not once, and she'd had several opportunities to be suspicious, had she felt he was any sort of danger to her, that he would do anything to hurt her. No. In spite of her normal skepticism and her belief on several occasions that he'd been lying to her, she couldn't seem to find it in her heart to distrust him on that most basic of levels.

It made no sense. To know he was lying to her and trust him at the same time. So what was it about him? Why did she trust him? If only she could remember where she'd seen him before ...

When ten minutes later, darkness still engulfed room seventeen, she checked up and down the street before crossing.

The room was embarrassingly easy to break into. All it took was her university ID, slipped between the door and the frame, and the door opened as easily as slicing a hot knife through butter.

Once inside, she closed the door and gave her eyes a moment to adjust. The problem with breaking in after dark was that it was not exactly easy to see. All she could make out was some very strange shadows. And she was obviously new to this subterfuge. She had forgotten to bring a flashlight.

She pondered the problem for a moment. No point in being here if she couldn't see anything. And if Charlie came back and saw the light, might he not just think he had left it on? No one else at this place would spare the issue a second thought.

Reaching over, she flicked on the light switch, blinking momentarily while her eyes adjusted to the change.

The place was clean, which surprised her given the general condition of the motel. However, she spared this realization only a moment's notice as her eyes found the large ... thing sitting in the center of the room, all the furniture pushed back to accommodate it. She pulled off the tarp covering it and stared at it in confusion.

Slowly, she circled it, regarding it from every angle, but was still unable to figure out what it was. In many ways, it resembled a horseless carriage. Well, other than the lack of wheels or skis on it. It seemed to consist of a platform, covered by a rug. Two chairs. A control panel of some sort. And an old fashioned lantern.

But ... what was its purpose? If it had wheels, it might serve as some sort of entry for a soap box derby except there was no steering wheel.

She sat down in what appeared to be the driver's seat and reached out to touch the panel before hesitating. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. But then how ...

Spotting a large, crinkled piece of paper on the bed, she rose to her feet and stepped over to pick it up. Unfolding the paper and turning it over, she stared at the image on the other side.

Obviously the blueprints for the machine. But ... Her mouth fell open when she read the title scrawled across the top. 'A Mechanism For Travel Through Time.'

She tossed the paper on the bed and headed for the door. She'd seen enough. Obviously this guy, whoever he was, was a genuine, honest-to-god wacko. He was planning to travel through time. Had even invented a machine to do so. Well, he would probably blow up both himself and the machine the first time he tried it.

She was so out of here. Exiting the room, she began walking down the street lost in thought. He was a wacko. Walking away was the right move. The only move.

So why was there still part of him that, in spite of how crazy it might sound, made sense to her? Where had she met him before? Because she would swear, she would really swear, that she'd met him before. And by his reaction when she had asked him about it, he knew exactly when and where.

"Who are you, Charlie King?" she quietly asked herself as she walked towards the dorms.

Finding *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells had taken Clark longer than it had actually taken to read the book. One of the advantages of being a super speed reader. He supposed the book had been interesting enough. But it was a little light on how the time machine actually worked.

Clark wasn't entirely certain what to do now. Oh, he had a few ideas. Maybe if he took apart the mechanism for determining the destination date and tried reassembling it. Maybe it was just an issue of a short somewhere in the system.

If that didn't work, he could try to find someone who might be able to figure out the theory behind the mechanism. One of those egg-head types, most likely. Perhaps someone at Star Labs or Gendell Labs.

Problem was if he did that, if he let someone from 1987 know that time travel was possible, would he change the future? Would he be promoting research into time travel at a time when such research would not have been happening if not for his interference?

The other option was for him to study physics and whatever other disciplines were necessary to have a better understanding of those issues himself. Oh, he could do that quickly enough. Or at least a lot quicker than other people given his ability to speed read and his eidetic memory. But it would still take weeks, months or even years.

The temptation to sink into depression was great. To be stuck here, where he couldn't make any changes, so close to the one great love of his life, being unable to pursue her, for weeks or months ...

He quickly pushed those useless thoughts away. He'd only been here a day. He couldn't give up yet.

What he needed right now was a distraction, something else to think about so that he could go at the problem again with a fresh mind.

But what could possibly take his mind off ... He smiled, leaning back in the library chair as images of Lois came to the forefront of his mind. She had been ... everything he'd ever dreamed of. Smart, beautiful, sassy. His smile faded as he thought about what had happened to her. By her description of last night, it sure seemed as if someone had slipped something into her drink.

But surely, she couldn't be the first to be a victim of this sort of crime. She might not be aware of other examples, but surely they must exist.

Sometime later, Clark was searching through past copies of the Daily Planet. He'd been caught off guard when the librarian informed him that past copies of the Daily Planet were kept on microfiche as opposed to computer files. Searching them was a lot slower, even for him, than simply typing key words into the computer.

Still, it was a lot quicker for him to do such a search than it would be for anyone else.

He started ten years back and began searching forward. He was surprised to find that what he was looking for was found, not on the older microfiche files, but in a hard copy of the paper from only a couple of months previously — one that had not yet made it onto microfiche.

He couldn't know for certain that this was connected to what had happened to Lois. But it had all the earmarks to set off alarm bells in his head. A young woman, Angelina Wesley, a college co-ed, found dead behind a well-known college party spot. No signs of trauma. No signs of a struggle. No indication of foul play.

But there were a few odd things. When she'd been found, she hadn't been wearing panties, indicating that sexual activity may have taken place shortly before death. The police had also recovered a semen sample, which backed up this assumption. No one had come forward to say that they had been with her for the evening. Drug tests had come up negative — but Clark doubted that they had been testing for the drugs he suspected. Alcohol was found in her system, but not in quantities high enough to explain her death — in fact, had she been caught behind the wheel of a car, her blood alcohol level wasn't even high enough to be considered criminal. Police were asking that anyone who had seen her in the hours before her death come forward.

The story ended by saying that there was to be a coroners inquest into her death, but since there was no follow-up story, he could only assume that no such inquest had yet taken place. His

eyes returned to the top of the story. It had been written by Serena Judd.

He'd never met the woman personally. She'd left before he'd arrived at the Planet. He knew her reputation, of course. She was a good reporter. Maybe one of the best reporters the paper had ever had. If there had been a follow up story, he had no doubt she would have written it. It wouldn't have simply slipped through the cracks like it might with another reporter.

Still ... what should he do with this information now that he had it? It was a question he simply could not answer.

Lois was digging into her backpack for the key to her room when she was distracted from her task.

"Where the hell have you been?"

Lois turned. "Excuse me?" she asked when she saw Linda standing in the doorway to her room.

"I called and called last night. You never answered."

Since saying 'I was drugged by someone with something called GHB for reasons I have yet to determine and so was sleeping the sleep of the dead' didn't seem like a good idea, Lois simply responded with, "And what would you have said if I had answered? Sorry about stealing your story. Sorry about moving in on a guy I knew you liked. Sorry about trashing your room."

"You can't still be mad at me about that!"

"Can't I?"

"I had to trash your room!" Linda exclaimed. "If I hadn't, you'd have figured out it was me before I even submitted your story. It kept you off my back — made you suspect it was the football players until it was too late. That's just the way the game is played. It has nothing to do with us. Nothing to do with our being friends. That was just business. It wasn't personal. Last night was personal. Last night I needed my friend! I was in jail! I needed you to bail me out. But no, you had to be out doing ..."

She gestured with her hands, indicating 'whatever.'

"Jail?" Lois was unable to resist asking even while pushing

Linda's skewed ideas about friendship and the news business to the back of her mind.

"The club Paul took me to was raided. The cops arrested me for using a fake ID. I eventually had to call my mother to come bail me out because you were out doing ... whatever. Do you have any idea how much grief my mother and step-father gave me?"

Lois turned back to the door to her room, unable to keep the corners of her mouth from twitching — enjoying the image of Linda, instead of spending the night in Paul's bed, sharing a cell with a bunch of women in black fishnet stockings and stiletto heels, all reeking of alcohol and sporting tattoos.

For some reason, the pain of Linda stealing Paul was not nearly as sharp today as it had been the previous day. Lois wasn't sure why. It was almost as if Paul had been magically erased from her heart and mind. In fact, now that she thought about it, she hadn't even thought about Paul all day.

On the other hand, if Linda thought that things were going to go back to normal after stealing Lois' story, she had another thing coming. Linda might not think she'd done anything wrong. But to Lois, she had violated the sacred bonds of friendship. So without another word, Lois opened the door to her room and stepped inside, closing the door on the muttered protests of her former friend.

Flicking on the light as she removed her coat, she groaned. She still hadn't taken the time to clean up her room since Linda had torn it apart. Right. So much had happened since she'd discovered her trashed room, she'd completely forgotten that she hadn't yet cleaned it up.

Well, no time like the present. After taking a moment to hang up her coat, she sat down on the side of her bed. She'd tossed everything in her footlocker the other day, so the first task was to go through it, properly putting things back where they belonged.

Only a moment later, Lois' world turned upside down as she stared down at the small Polaroid snap shot in her hands. Everything she'd believed about the reality of her existence lay shattered around her. She'd have sworn such a thing was not possible, but in her hand was absolute proof that it was.

She knew where she had seen Charlie King before. Ten years ago. Her guardian angel. And he hadn't changed a bit — right down to the style of his glasses, the cut of his hair and his leather jacket. Regardless of how impossible it might seem, Charlie King was traveling through time.

PART THREE

'To Have And To Hold'

Screeching tires and horrified screams woke Clark from a deep sleep. When he couldn't immediately locate his Superman suit, he decided to go without it, dashing through the door and up into the sky faster than the average person could bat an eye. Though, why he'd grabbed his glasses, he had no idea. Force of habit when he wasn't in the suit, no doubt. Still, without anywhere else to put them, he put them on his face as he sped towards the emergency.

Arriving at the Hobbs' River Bridge, he spotted a semi-trailer that had crashed through the railings and was now dangling over the edge of the river. The truck began tipping forward, as if in slow motion. Bystanders were screaming.

Darting forward, Clark grabbed the front of the truck and began to lift, only then looking at the driver, smiling to reassure him that there was no need to worry, that Superman had everything under control.

Looking into the shocked eyes of the driver, staring at him in stunned disbelief, caused a tingle to develop in the back of Clark's mind. Suddenly, it hit him where exactly he was and what he was doing. Still, now that he was here it wasn't as if he could just return the truck to its precarious position and leave this man to his fate so he carefully set the truck down on solid land before disappearing into the night.

He stepped back into his motel room minutes later, shaking as the impact of what he had just done hit him. It was entirely possible that someone was alive this morning who had originally died. How exactly would that affect the time line?

The air was invigorating as Lois jogged along her usual path. After yesterday, the exercise was exactly what she needed. A chance to work her body and give her mind time to ponder yesterday evening's startling revelation.

It was just so unbelievable. As a result, her mind kept trying to find other explanations, ways of dismissing her conclusions or holes in her reasoning.

The biggest reason to doubt all of this, of course, was the flying thing. Her guardian angel had flown — twice. First, when he'd caught her falling out of that tree. Then after they'd confronted the 'mobsters.' The idea that he'd flown when he caught her falling out of the tree she could write off as the over-active imagination of a nine year old child. She supposed he could have been walking under the tree when she'd fallen and caught her. But when he'd left her afterwards ...

Okay, so maybe the picture of a black streak across the sky wasn't absolute proof that he had flown out of there. It had been easy to believe when she'd relegated him to the role of 'guardian angel'. Of course a guardian angel could fly. And, she supposed, a guardian angel might not age. What a guardian angel wouldn't need was a machine to travel through time.

So that ruled out Charlie being a guardian angel.

On the other hand, why did he always seem to show up when she needed him? He'd caught her from possibly falling to her death when she was nine. And he'd saved her from possibly being raped on Friday night. Of course, he hadn't shown up when

she'd been in a car accident when she was in high school and she certainly could have used his help then.

But then, did she even believe in guardian angels?

She gave her head a shake. She was going around in circles about this.

Maybe he was a time traveler who came from a distant future where people had learned to fly. Maybe that leather jacket was equipped with some advanced technology that allowed him to fly.

Without conscious thought, she found herself deviating from her normal route.

Clark was just stepping out of the shower when this headache hit. He held his body, waiting for it to pass the way it had in the past. This time, however, the agony seemed to last longer and take even more out of him. When he finally rose, his joints continued to ache.

Lois reduced her pace from a jog to a walk, giving her heart time to slow, before coming to a complete stop when she found herself across the street from The Cozy Motel. She stared at the door to room seventeen for a long time, lost in thought.

Should she go to his room, pound on the door and demand answers to her questions? That was what she wanted to do. What the reporter in her screamed at her to do.

She took a step towards the motel before stopping again as she remembered how scared he'd looked whenever she had asked something personal the previous day. He'd been nothing but good to her. He'd saved her twice. And okay, he had a secret. A big secret. Huge. One that eclipsed any other secret she'd ever known. The type of secret that could win her the Pulitzer before she was even out of college. Time travel. A glimpse at a future where mankind could fly.

Damn! Why had he had to be so good to her? Maybe Linda had the right idea. Go for the jugular no matter how many friends had to be destroyed along the way. And Charlie was a friend. Could she really expose her friend for a secret he obviously wanted to keep?

A reporter was supposed to be impartial. Not get involved with her stories. No one would blame her for publishing this story, splashing it across the front page of the Ink and Quill, seeing it syndicated in papers all across the country. After the fact, they would applaud her, invite her to speak on talk shows, cover her in awards, feature her story in every magazine. She'd go down in history together with Woodward and Bernstein, Norcross and Judd.

She began marching across the parking lot towards room seventeen of the Cozy Motel when she suddenly stopped once again.

But ... what about Charlie? What would it do to him if she exposed him in that fashion? She didn't know why he didn't want anyone to know, but he obviously didn't.

She closed her eyes. Damn! She couldn't do it. She couldn't betray a friend, not even to get the biggest story she was likely to see in her lifetime.

She turned away from the motel, from the story, from the Pulitzer, and began to walk back the way she'd come.

"Lois?"

Lois spun around at the sound of a surprised voice saying her name.

"Charlie," she responded, feeling her heart rate suddenly speed up. Nerves. It was just nerves. Seeing him when she wasn't expecting it.

She suddenly became aware of the easy grace of his movements as he walked towards her. And being allowed to simply watch him as he approached, she realized something else. Molly was only partially right. Handsome didn't even begin to describe Charlie King. He was ... He was ... He was whatever

came after handsome.

"What are you doing here?" he asked as he closed the distance between them.

"Oh, you know," Lois said dismissively, gesturing to her jogging clothes. "Just out for a morning jog. Yep. That's it. Got to get the old cardiovascular system pumping. Need to stay in shape for running down those stories." She began to jog on the spot as if to illustrate her point. She was over-compensating. She knew that. She just couldn't quite seem to stop herself.

"I guess," Charlie responded, looking slightly skeptical.

"So this is where you're staying?" she half asked, half said. "It looks ..." She hesitated as together both she and Charlie looked over at the decrepit old building. "... cozy."

Charlie's eyes shot back to hers as the corners of his mouth crept into a smile.

She couldn't help smiling in return.

"I bet it's been a while since someone described it that way," Charlie said, clearly amused.

For a moment, she just stood there, staring into his eyes. Eyes that were so familiar to her — and she finally understood why. Eyes that she'd seen in her dreams most of her life. Eyes that she knew and trusted. And, now that she was no longer a nine year old child, eyes that were sexy as hell. A new kind of electricity slowly charged the air around them until it seemed to practically crackle. It took Lois by surprise and she felt herself moving closer, drawn in by ... she hardly knew what.

Suddenly, Charlie took a step back, breaking the moment. "I ... uhh ... that is to say ... uhh ..." He took another step back, seeming to struggle for words.

"You know, I'm glad I ran into you like this," Lois suddenly said when it became obvious that he was trying to make his escape. She didn't want him to leave. Not now. Not yet. Not when she had so many questions.

What if he climbed back into his time machine and she never saw him again? No, she couldn't let him go. Not while there were so many unanswered questions — including the new one about what had just happened between them. Because he'd been there, too. Getting as lost in her eyes as she'd been in his — until he'd backed away from what had been happening between them.

"Why's that?" he asked cautiously.

She suddenly felt as if she were dealing with a skittish cat. She'd known an alley cat like that once. It had taken her weeks to persuade it to come close enough so that she could pet it. She knew instinctively that keeping him from scampering off was bound to require just as delicate a touch. Not her normal style, of course. But bull-in-a-china-shop was likely to send him running a hundred years into the future. "I wanted to thank you for your help yesterday," she said softly, glancing up at him through her eyelashes.

It seemed to work, because his nervous energy evaporated. "It wasn't a problem, Lois. So did you go to the hospital to get that blood work done?"

"Actually, I went to see my doctor and you were right. She found GHB in my system."

He pulled in a sharp breath and for a moment, his eyes seemed to blaze with anger. Then the look faded behind a more controlled mask of concern. "So what are you going to do now?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure. I want to know who did this ... and why. But I'm a little lost about what my next step should be."

His eyes registered something. "Wait here," he suddenly said before turning back to the door to his room.

Clark wasn't entirely sure how it had happened, why he was unexpectedly sitting in a coffee shop eating a donut while Lois sat on the other side of the table, reading Serena Judd's article

about the young woman who'd died from unknown causes.

He shouldn't be here. He did know that. But when she'd mentioned being uncertain about her next step, he'd immediately found himself going to get the article for her. When, after her first brief perusal of the article, she'd grabbed his arm and insisted that they find somewhere to sit down so that she could read the article more thoroughly, he'd been unable to resist.

"So you think the same thing happened to this girl that happened to me?" Lois finally asked, looking up from the article.

"I don't know. But the circumstances are ..." He struggled to find the right word.

"... interesting," Lois completed for him.

He smiled and nodded. "That's as good a word for it as anything."

"So ... what do you think? Talk to the coroner?"

His eyebrows rose even as his eyes registered admiration for her idea. "Good idea. Depending on whether or not he still has a good sample of her blood to test it could be a great idea."

"Did you check to see if they've done the coroner's inquest yet?"

"There wasn't a follow up story in the Daily Planet on it."

"Then one hasn't been done. Serena Judd is too good a reporter not to be on top of that," she said.

He smiled when he realized she had echoed his thoughts the evening before.

She stared at him thoughtfully for a moment before speaking again. "Listen, Charlie, I know you're not planning to stay around here for long."

For a moment, he felt startled. What did she know?

"You told Molly and me as much at the house the other day," she added quickly.

He relaxed.

"But while you're here ... Would you work with me on this?"

He opened his mouth to tell her that it was impossible, but she spoke again before he could.

"Please?" she asked, her hand coming to lightly rest on his.

He glanced down, startled by the heat such an innocent touch could send through his body.

"I need to know who did this to me. To her," she added, gesturing to the article with her free hand. "And you seem to know more about this type of drug abuse than I do."

He glanced back into her eyes and nodded helplessly. Could he honestly be expected to deny this woman anything?

"Thanks, Charlie," she replied softly.

"Hey, turn that up," someone said, startling them both.

Clark looked around to see someone pointing to a television playing high in the corner of the coffee shop. He froze when he saw the image on the screen. The middle-aged man from the truck incident this morning was holding a pile of photos. The camera focused in on the top one for a moment. It was a photo of a dashboard from a truck, the top of a dark head sticking slightly above it.

When the man flipped to a second, photo, taken immediately after the first one, the head higher in relation to the dashboard, Clark was suddenly having difficulty breathing.

Lois saw Charlie's reaction before turning to look at the television just as someone turned up the volume.

"... was starting to tip over the edge of the bridge when there he was. He flew in and grabbed the front of the truck, picked it up and set it safely back on the bridge."

"Then what happened?"

"He flew off. Didn't even stick around so I could thank him. I took these pictures of him. You can see there how he had dark hair." The man continued to flip through photos, as if he'd had the finger depressed on the shutter release button, taking picture after picture in rapid succession.

Lois snuck a quick peek at Charlie who sat staring at the screen, looking white as a ghost. She turned to look back at the television as the pictures continued. It was obvious that the head was coming up. Hair, eyebrows, the rims of glasses, very familiar glasses ... Lois felt the blood pounding through her veins.

"Unfortunately, at this point," the man continued, "I ran out of film. But that's a man out there. He looked up and smiled at me before carrying the truck over to set it on the bridge."

The camera turned towards the interviewer. "And there you have it, Colby. To recap, the driver of the truck that crashed through the side of Hobbs' Bridge in the early hours of the morning claims that a man, dark hair and glasses, caught the truck just before it plunged him into a murky grave and setting it back on the bridge before disappearing into the night. His story was confirmed by at least half a dozen bystanders."

Lois turned to look at Charlie who, although he no longer looked as if he was about to pass out, still looked scared — very scared.

"That is so stupid," Lois said, injecting as much disbelief as she could into her voice.

"What?" Charlie asked, finally dragging his eyes away from the television.

"What passes for news these days." She gestured to the television. "They take some pictures of the dashboard of a truck and concoct a story about a flying man. What's next? Little green men arriving from outer space?" Her words had the desired effect. He relaxed back into his seat.

"I think that movie has already been made," he joked back, his voice losing some of its edge.

Lois grinned, even as she added incredible strength to her list of things she now knew about this man. Given that she now felt as if she'd crossed over into a world where the impossible was indeed possible, it wasn't such a stretch to believe he could have superhuman strength.

The trip to the coroner's office had been spectacularly useless. Or maybe it hadn't been completely useless. They'd learned that the coroner didn't work on Sunday and so they would have to come back the next day.

"Nice of Molly to let us borrow her car," Clark said as both he and Lois climbed inside.

"Yeah. Molly's pretty special." A small frown appeared between Lois' eyebrows.

"What?"

"Nothing. I guess I'm just sort of worried about her."

"Is she in some sort of trouble? Anything I can do?"

Lois smiled at him, reaching over to affectionately squeeze his forearm. "No. Unfortunately. A matter of the heart."

Clark nodded his understanding. He knew all about that, didn't he?

Lois let out a breath, directing her mind back on the task at hand. "If only it wasn't Sunday," she said in frustration.

Clark tilted his head to the side. "Sunday, hey?" he said thoughtfully.

"What?"

"Well ... I'm just wondering, but ... Is it possible the Devils are playing today?"

Lois' face instantly lit up. "Why, Mr. King, I do believe they are? You wouldn't be asking me out to a football game, would you?"

"Would you accept?" he responded, enjoying her excitement.

"That depends. This wouldn't be a date, would it?"

She was teasing. He knew that. But her words had him swallowing hard. There was nothing he would like more. Not that it would be wise. No. Definitely not wise at all. Forcing himself to push the longing in his heart aside, he made himself keep up her light-hearted banter. "You mean like where I meet your

parents and we make out behind the local Dairy Freeze?"

Lois laughed.

"So ... how about it?" Clark continued. "We can blend in with the crowds, maybe get a chance to do a little snooping around."

"You're on," Lois responded, starting up the engine. "I just need to make a quick trip back to my dorm. Need to change into something that will make me stand out a little less."

Clark wasn't entirely sure that Lois wouldn't stand out wearing a jeans and a t-shirt in a room full of supermodels, but he didn't respond as she pulled the car onto the street.

Lois nervously stepped out of the dorm, looking around for Charlie. In order to blend in with the crowds at the ball game, she'd put on a thick turtleneck sweater and an over-sized university sweatshirt with her jeans. The whole operation should have only taken moments. Yet she had found herself standing in front of a mirror, looking at herself from different angles.

She'd quit the moment she realized what she was doing. Grabbing a hat and a pair of gloves, she headed for the door. What Charlie thought of her in this outfit wasn't important, after all. It wasn't as if he were her boyfriend or something. And he was obviously a lot older than she was — even if he was the sexiest man she thought she'd ever met.

Besides, he was traveling in time — for what reason, she had no idea. Just a sight-seer perhaps. Well, whatever the reason he would, undoubtedly, be leaving soon to go back to where he came from. That made these feelings pointless. Less than pointless, actually. Dangerous was a more accurate description.

Still, it was hard not to respond emotionally to a man as good-looking as Charlie who was also so sweet and smart and ... Well, it would be hard not to notice the affection in his eyes when he looked at her.

Still, for all she knew, she was his great-great grandmother or something.

No. Developing feelings for this gorgeous time-traveler was definitely not something she was going to do.

Since the football stadium was only a short walk across campus, Charlie had returned Molly's car while Lois had changed. She slipped on her gloves and slapped her hands together to keep warm as she waited for Charlie's return.

"Maybe we should have taken the car," Charlie said, coming up behind her.

She turned, smiling automatically when she saw him.

"You look cold," he continued, taking her hands and rubbing them between his.

"I'll be fine once we get moving," she said as she slid her hands free. Still, she couldn't seem to stop herself from slipping her arm through his as they began walking. It was just for support, she assured herself. After all, with the new snow, the sidewalk was a little slippery. It was simply the prudent course of action.

For a few minutes, Lois walked silently next to Charlie, just enjoying being with him. When she realized what she was doing, she quickly refocused her mind. "Did I tell you what I learned about GHB?" she asked.

"No — what?"

"Well, apparently it's used as a performance enhancer and to help with muscle definition. So the question becomes ... who might have access to this drug?"

"Football players," Charlie responded immediately. "Okay, well I guess that makes sense — especially given the number of enemies you seem to have made among the Devils. But, Lois, GHB is not difficult to make. It can be made in a homemade lab from easily obtainable items."

"What? How do you know that?"

He seemed to tense for a moment and she regretted the question. "Way to go, Lane," she silently told herself. "He knows

because he's from the future — and undoubtedly has had access to information that you can only dream of."

"I heard it somewhere," he responded uncomfortably.

"Oh," Lois said, letting that question go. "I guess that pretty much means it could have been made by anyone."

"Well, not anyone. It had to be made by someone who knows how to make it," he said with a grin.

She looked at him, eyebrows raised in question.

"And, no, I didn't make it."

Lois laughed. "I know that, Charlie." She strengthened her grip on his arm. "I trust you." She bumped his hip affectionately.

The look of adoration he gave her in response sent heat flooding through her to settle in her belly. She quickly focused her eyes on where they were going.

"So ..." she said, clearing her throat. "What can you tell me about making GHB that might help us catch this bastard?"

"Or bastards."

"Or bastards," she agreed.

"Well, let's see if I can remember. Uhh ... You need GBL."

"GBL?"

"Gamma-Butyrolactone," he clarified.

"Oh, of course. How silly of me to think that when you started telling me what was in it, I'd actually understand what you were talking about."

He grinned that amused grin of his that never failed to make her grin as well. "It's ... a paint stripper. Commonly used on antique furniture."

"Oh, great. You're telling me I've ingested paint stripper for antique furniture."

"Uhh ... it gets better."

"Better than paint stripper? Hard to imagine. So what could possibly be better than paint stripper?"

"Drain cleaner?"

She stopped and stared at him in stunned silence. "Are you serious?"

"Unfortunately, yes. NaOH, also known as sodium hydroxide or lye — commonly used in drain cleaners as well as various other things."

"Great," she mumbled as they resumed walking. "Anything else?"

"That's basically it. Well, you need other incidentals, of course."

"Like?"

"PH testing papers, certain types of sauce pans or casserole dishes, a stove-top burner or oven, rubber gloves to avoid chemical burns, some sort of filter if you want to change it from a liquid to a powder. Things like that."

They walked along in silence for a moment more. "So we're looking for someone who has antique furniture, plugged up drains and a pool."

"And likes to cook. But ... well, given the fact that he has drain cleaner, his drains are probably no longer clogged."

"Oh, well. That narrows it down. We're looking for someone with previously clogged drains."

Charlie laughed. Then reached up, placing his hand over hers where it rested on her arm. "Don't worry, Lois. We'll find him."

And she believed him. They would find him ... or them and they'd never hurt or humiliate another girl ever again.

Normally, getting tickets to the Devils' home games at the last minute was all but impossible. Scalpers sold tickets outside the stadium at highly inflated prices. Today was different. Scalpers were desperately trying to dump tickets.

Lois and Clark shared a look of disbelief as scalpers approached and began trying to underbid each other in an effort to make a sale.

"Just don't think I'm usually this cheap a date," Lois said

when Clark, waving her off, removed his wallet and purchased two tickets from the lowest bidder. "What do you think that was all about?" Lois asked as she and Clark entered the stadium.

"I imagine that after ..." His voice dropped to a whisper. "... your story ..." They both glanced around to make sure no one had heard. "... the university insisted that the players under suspicion be benched until it was sorted out."

Lois' eyebrows rose. "And no one wants to pay for tickets to see us get our asses whipped."

"That would be my guess."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Whatever happened to school spirit? Cheering for your team no matter what? You guys are fickle," she concluded, raising her voice to be heard by those around her who, not having heard the rest of the discussion, had no idea what she was talking about.

Clark laughed. "Come on," he said, taking her hand and leading her towards a nearby concession booth. "Two dogs," he told the bored young man behind the counter. "... and ..." He turned to Lois. "What do you want to drink with your dog?"

"Do you have diet cream soda?" she asked the guy behind the counter. When he shook his head, she said, "Diet coke."

"One coke and one diet coke. Do you have cans?"

Once Clark had paid for their food and they were looking for their seats, Clark gestured to the can of diet coke Lois was carrying. "Not opened. No danger of it being drugged."

"Good idea."

The crowds were light making it easy enough for them to find their seats.

"Mmm," Clark moaned, taking a bite of his hotdog.

Lois grinned. "That good, hey?"

"There is nothing ... And I mean nothing as good as hotdogs at a ball game."

"I just hope you know that no matter how much you pay for this date, you're not getting lucky afterwards."

Clark glanced over at her, startled, only relaxing when he realized she was teasing him. "Oh, no. You misunderstand, Ms. Lane. The reason I'm paying is to ensure that 'my' virtue remains in tact."

Clark reveled in the sound of her immediate laughter.

"Your virtue is safe with me, Mr. King. But I promise, I'll keep that technique in mind for future reference."

Lois was having such a great time it was easy to forget this was not a real date. She didn't care that the Devils were two touchdowns behind. She didn't care that she didn't understand the rules of the game. She didn't even care that she didn't like football. Cheering was the thing. Having Charlie trying to explain what was happening was the thing. Just laughing and being with Charlie was the thing.

When everyone else cheered, so did she. When others yelled about blind officials, so did she. When everyone else jumped to their feet, so did she.

When she got cold, Charlie's leather jacket appeared around her shoulders. When she finished her soda, Charlie disposed of the empty can. When his arm slid along the back of her chair, she let her head rest against it.

Suddenly, people began rising to their feet, pushing and shoving past each other to reach the aisles.

"Is it over?" Lois asked, disappointed.

Charlie laughed. "It's half time."

"Half time?"

Charlie laughed again. "They take a brief break half way through the game and everyone heads out to the bathrooms and to get food." He glanced around them. She followed his gaze. The stadium wasn't all that full to begin with. Now they were pretty much alone. "Maybe this would be a good time for us to ... you know ..."

She looked at him in confusion before his meaning sank in. Damn. How was it she had managed to forget why they had come here today?

He rose to his feet, groaning slightly, his hand going out to rub his lower back.

"Back pain?" she asked.

"I guess," he said, sounding somewhat confused.

Not that she was, of course. Picking up a truck and setting it on a bridge was bound to result in a few sore muscles.

"Here. Sit down." She moved to the edge of her seat, turning slightly even as she held his seat down for him.

"What?" he asked, sitting down again.

"Turn," she said, pushing on his shoulder until he was sitting with his back to her.

Once she was satisfied with his position, she began working the muscles of his lower back. His appreciative moan was like music to her ears.

"What about ... you know ... snooping around?" he asked.

"Well, there's going to be a lot of people out there right now, isn't there?"

"Yeah."

"So will we really be able to ... sneak into anywhere worth getting into?" Her voice was a mere whisper, her mouth next to his ear. She couldn't help notice with satisfaction the shiver that rippled through his body as her breath tickled him.

"I suppose."

"So ... maybe we'd be better off doing this when everyone starts coming back in for the next half."

"The second half," he corrected in a distracted voice.

"The second half," she responded with a whisper in his ear that again made him tremble. She smiled. She'd just had to see if that would work twice in a row.

Then, without warning, he stiffened.

"Charlie?" she asked, when he abruptly stood, turning to face her.

"Someone just recognized you," he whispered, nodding over her shoulder.

Lois cautiously glanced in the direction he had indicated to see that Frank, the first football player to approach her at Friday's party, had indeed spotted her. She searched her mind, realizing for the first time that Frank must be Frank LaDuke, one of the players she'd named in her story. And since he was not dressed to play, he must have been benched for this game.

"Come on," Charlie said, taking her hand and leading her between the seats, away from Frank as quickly as he could without looking too suspicious. After a moment, and in a show of strength that was impressive, he picked her up and moved her in front of him, putting himself between her and Frank.

A quick glance over her shoulder told her that Frank was following, gaining even. It didn't occur to her that she should just stop and see what Frank wanted. Charlie's urgency at getting her out of there was infectious — as if he knew something about Frank's intentions that made him fear for her safety.

They rounded a large concrete wall, blocking them from Frank's sight momentarily. The area was deserted at the moment, increasing Lois' nervousness. She was just about to run when hands on her waist lifted her off her feet, hoisting her up so that she could scramble over the concrete wall and into the upper level of bleachers.

When Charlie didn't follow, she glanced back over the wall. "Charlie," she whispered, seeing him standing casually against the wall.

He waved her off just before Frank rounded the corner. Lois ducked down, her heart pounding, her breathing coming hard and fast. She was safe enough. Frank would never think to look for her in the upper level bleachers. Charlie, on the other hand, was still down there. He might be undeniably strong, but he wasn't

invulnerable. His sore back muscles were proof enough of that. She glanced back over the edge.

"Where is she?" Frank demanded, approaching Charlie.

"Who?" Charlie asked.

"Lane! Where is she?"

"She went to the restroom."

"So what are you doing out here?" Frank asked suspiciously.

"For some unfathomable reason, she didn't want me to go to the bathroom with her."

Lois could tell that Frank wasn't entirely satisfied.

"So why are you out here and not back in your seat?"

"Not that I report to you," Charlie said, sounding annoyed now. "But I wanted to stretch my legs. What are you wanting Lois for? Are you friends?"

"That woman doesn't have friends," Frank growled, looking past Charlie, as if dismissing him as unimportant. A group of people rounded the corner causing Frank to look around, undoubtedly checking to see if Lois was in amongst the people beginning to make their way back to the bleachers. He looked back at Charlie when he didn't see her. "If you know what's good for you, you'll stay away from Lane 'cause she's going to be in a world of hurt eventually and so will anyone who gets too close to her."

Lois gasped when, in a move almost too quick for her to follow, Charlie grabbed Frank by the lapels of his football jacket and spun him around, pushing him up against the wall, easily knocking the wind out of him. "You've got that backwards," Charlie hissed in a voice that sent a shiver through Lois. "I'm warning you to stay away from her ... if you know what's good for you. Otherwise ... you'll be the one experiencing a 'world of hurt.' Got it?"

Surprised by the sudden show of strength, Frank didn't respond. Charlie gave him one final push before dropping him and turning to walk back to the bleachers.

"Charlie!" Lois gasped when Frank dove at him.

One quick step to the side and Frank flew past Charlie, skidding head-first across the pavement.

"Like I said," Charlie said, leaning over Frank as he lay half stunned on the concrete, "stay away from Lois Lane."

Relief coursing through her, Lois sank to the floor, her back to the concrete barrier. She was only beginning to recover when Charlie arrived in front of her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, offering her his hand.

"Am I okay?" she asked in disbelief, taking his hand and allowing him to pull her to her feet. As soon as she was standing, she threw his arms around him, giving him a quick hug before releasing him again. "What do you say we leave?" she asked, suddenly not the least bit interested in the second half of the football game. "We've got some snooping to do and then I suggest we get out of here."

"You still want to do some snooping?" he asked in disbelief.

"You bet. But ... do you?"

A slow smile spread across his face, answering her question.

"Then let's go," Lois said. Taking a step away from him, she suddenly stopped and grabbed his arm as the world spun around her. "Whoa!"

"Lois?" Charlie asked in concern.

"Nothing. Just got a little dizzy there for a moment."

"The after effects of taking GHB," Charlie informed her.

"Wonderful," Lois responded, before, taking a tighter hold on his arm, she began leading him towards the exit.

Lois hoisted herself up onto the hood of the car to wait.

The attempt to visit the locker room had been a complete bust. Or mostly. She had spotted Joe during their efforts and he had promised to meet them by his car later — which was why she was currently seated on the hood of an old Chevy at the far end of

the parking lot outside the football stadium. But otherwise ...

Who would have thought a college football team would have so much security around their locker room on game day? Of course, she'd tried talking her way around them. Then, when that hadn't worked, had attempted to distract one of the guards by getting into a philosophical discussion about women interviewing men in their locker room so that Charlie could sneak in on his own, see what he could find. But it seemed Charlie wasn't the sneaky type and had quickly been caught.

So the expedition had been a bust. Or ... well, maybe not a complete bust. Lois couldn't help the smirk that formed on her lips as she thought back to one exchange in particular.

"Are you saying you'd be comfortable having a man in your locker room interviewing you while you were getting changed?" the guard had asked.

"Six of one, half a dozen of the other," Lois had said trying to sound dismissive, all the while knowing that a blush crept up her cheeks. She hadn't dared look at Charlie.

"Right," the guard had responded skeptically. "So you're naked and some guy is there, trying to ask you questions and you'd be just fine with it?"

Lois had wished he'd just let it go. But he must have sensed weakness because he continued.

"Cause I would think a lot of guys would enjoy seeing you naked. I suspect the Ink and Quill would have a rush on male reporters wanting to cover sports if they thought they might get to see you naked in a locker room. Probably have them lined up around the block."

"That's not the point," Lois had responded, stumbling slightly on her words as she struggled to remember just exactly what her point had been.

It was then that it had happened. At first, she'd thought she was going to die of embarrassment because the guard suddenly turned to Charlie who Lois had been working hard to ignore during this part of the discussion.

"What about you?" the guard had asked. "I bet you'd like to see her naked. Probably had a few fantasies about it. Hot chick like her."

"I ... umm ... uhh ... " Charlie had said. "It ... uhh ... "

When Lois turned and shot him a glare, he shrugged helplessly. It was as if he was trying to figure out the right answer. Maybe his mother had once told him the truth was always the right answer, but he was doubting she'd foreseen this particular situation at the time.

Suddenly, the whole thing had struck Lois as funny and she'd laughed, laughing even harder when she'd seen a blush appear on Charlie's cheeks.

Lois glanced over at the object of her thoughts as he stood nearby, watching out, she suspected, for any other football players who might spot her. So ... he'd thought about seeing her naked, had he? Well, chances were that ruled her out as being his great, great grandmother.

Lois suddenly grinned as her eyes tracked down his body. She had to admit, she was glad about that. After all, the thought of seeing him naked wasn't exactly a hardship either. And she'd hate to think she was having these lascivious thoughts about her great, great grandson.

"What?" Charlie asked, turning to glance at her.

"Nothing. Just ... " She gestured abstractly. " ... lost in thought."

Charlie nodded once before returning to stare out over the parking lot.

Her mind drifted again and she found herself thinking about her near encounter with Frank. Things had happened so fast, it hadn't left her with time to think. But since then, she'd realized a number of things about that encounter had been ... odd.

The big thing, now that she thought about it, was there was

no way he should have been able to give her a boost over that concrete barmier. It was about twelve feet high. Unless he had flown, of course. And since she was currently wearing his leather jacket, that pretty much ruled out the possibility that his flying was the result of some advanced technology connected to his jacket. Maybe it was in his jeans or something.

In addition to the flying thing, there were a number of other things that had been odd as well. For example, how had Charlie known that Frank had spotted her? He'd been facing away from Frank. It was almost as if he had eyes in the back of his head. But no. She'd have noticed that while giving him a back massage.

Maybe he'd heard Frank say something. Frank had been a long ways away when Charlie had first pointed him out to her. Could he really have heard Frank from that distance?

Still, if he had superhuman strength, was it outside the realm of possibility that he might also possess superhuman hearing? She hesitated for a moment before whispering, too low for anyone to hear, "Charlie?"

"Hmmm?" Charlie answered in response, looking over at her again.

"Nothing. I was just thinking that after we meet with Joe, I should probably check in with Molly. She was going to see if she could find out any more about GHB from the books I took over to the sorority house."

"Mmm ... " he responded, before resuming his vigil. Her own personal bodyguard.

Well, that was interesting. He'd heard her breathe his name even though he was a good twenty feet away. She immediately added 'super hearing' to her list of things she knew about Charlie King.

And if his hearing was that good, what about his other senses? Might he not have exceptional eyesight, touch, taste or smell as well? She couldn't be certain, but she tucked those away in a corner of her mind for future reference before turning her mind back to Charlie's hearing.

So if Charlie's hearing was that good, what exactly had he heard Frank say that had spooked him so badly? A threat of some sort, obviously. It was really too bad that she couldn't just ask him. But she knew that to do so would have him bolting for the hills ... or, more likely, the time machine.

So if he was exceptionally strong, could hear things from a long distance, fly and travel through time ... What else might he be able to do?

He obviously didn't read minds — otherwise he'd have known what she was up to when she'd whispered his name. Probably just as well, given some of her thoughts about Charlie in the day since they had first met. A blush was suddenly creeping up her cheeks.

She forced her mind back to the encounter with Frank. Charlie had also shown himself to have super quick reflexes, spinning Frank up against the wall and then side-stepping his attack. Well, he could certainly move when he wanted to. Was it beyond the capacities of a regular athletic man? She wasn't certain. On the other hand, when he'd flown off after their encounter when she was nine, he'd been incredibly fast. So superior, even superhuman reflexes and speed were a distinct possibility.

"Lois," Charlie said.

Lois snapped her eyes up to his from where they had been absentmindedly checking out the cut of his jeans.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"I don't like this."

"You said that before."

"How do you know this Joe isn't setting you up? You said he was one of the people at the party Friday evening. How do you know ... "

"I know," Lois said, cutting him off. "I've known Joe for

years. I even dated him briefly in high school. He wouldn't do anything to hurt me."

"Lois, they don't call it 'date rape' because strangers are responsible."

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. After all, it was obvious he was genuinely concerned about her safety. And she had to admit ... she found it sort of cute. Not that she was wrong about Joe. Or that she couldn't take care of herself. But ...

"Charlie," she said softly. "Trust me on this, okay? Joe is in love with Debby. He isn't carrying a torch for me and I'm not carrying one for him. We're just friends. Neither one of us want anything more."

He seemed to take in her words, digesting them.

"What about you?" he finally asked.

"What about me?"

"You said Joe is in love with Debby ... " He couldn't seem to complete his thought, almost as if he believed he didn't have the right.

"Are you asking if I'm ... involved with anyone?"

He didn't respond. He just continued to watch her. But his eyes told her that he needed to know.

"I'm not involved with anyone, Charlie," she finally said, unable to resist his eyes. "At least ... I wasn't when I woke up this morning." Her final words were not much more than a whisper.

His mouth fell slightly open as her words registered. He took a step towards her and her heart rate picked up. Another and she felt her mouth go dry. Her eyes remained on his, unable now to look away, as he stepped closer. She moved her legs slightly and he stepped between them, resting his hands on the car on either side of her body. His eyes flicked down to her lips and she felt her tongue come out to moisten them. He gave a small groan, moving his head down to ...

"Hey, kid."

Charlie spun away from her and it took Lois a moment to refocus enough to realize that Joe was walking towards them.

"Hi," Joe said, turning his attention to Clark and sticking out his hand, his smile open and friendly. "I'm Joe Malloy."

"Cla ... Charlie King," Charlie responded.

Lois narrowed her eyes as she noticed the slip. Most people didn't slip up on their own name, regardless of how distracted they were. She immediately added that to the things she knew about this man — his name wasn't Charlie King.

"So what are you doing here?" Joe asked, turning his attention to Lois. "I thought I told you to stay away from the football players."

"Actually, you told me to watch out for the football players," Lois responded.

Joe gave her a look that said in his opinion it was pretty much the same thing.

"Anyway," Lois continued, "that's not the point. What I'm trying to find out is if any of the football players are using performance enhancing drugs."

Joe's eyebrows rose. "Do you have reason to suspect they are?"

"Not exactly. It's just ... " She hesitated for a moment, struggling with exactly how much to tell Joe. She glanced over at Charlie but he just shrugged, leaving the issue up to her.

"Okay, well ... " she finally said. "The thing is that something happened after you left on Friday."

"You're okay, aren't you?" Joe asked, his eyes taking a quick inventory of her body as if checking for missing pieces.

"I'm fine. But I think someone slipped a drug called GHB into my drink. Since there were football players at the party and I read that GHB is a performance enhancing drug ... " She let him fill in the pieces.

"I know about GHB. It's considered an alternative to steroids," Joe said as the implications of her words sank in. "And,

yeah, I think some of the guys have probably at least tried it."

"Have you?" Charlie asked.

"Once. It's not illegal so I gave it a try. It made my head fuzzy until I fell asleep. Apparently, it has to be taken over a period of time to have the necessary results. I just couldn't see suffering through the side effects long enough to achieve those results."

"Who else has tried it?"

"Well, the time I tried it was back in high school so ... " He thought about the question for a moment. "I remember a couple of the guys talking about it, but ... I'm sorry I don't remember who."

"I don't suppose you'd be comfortable looking through some lockers," Lois said.

Joe just raised his eyebrows at that.

"I didn't think so. Well, if you do happen to see or hear anything ... "

"I'll let you know."

"Well, that was a waste of a day," Lois said as she and Clark walked together towards the Alpha Nu Rho house.

"A waste of a day?" Clark asked.

Lois shot him a confused look. "The coroner wasn't in. We didn't get a chance to as much as look in the Devils' locker room. And Joe didn't know anything. How is that not a waste of a day?"

"We found out the coroner would be in tomorrow. We wrote off Joe as a possible source of information. And we realized just how mad the football players are at you — at least if Frank is any indication."

He didn't add that he'd heard Frank say he was going to kill her. Probably just a figure of speech, after all. Not that he'd wanted to wait around to find out. He had played with the idea of telling Lois what he'd heard. But how could he explain having heard it in the first place? Besides, he was satisfied that after overhearing his conversation with Frank, Lois was taking the Frank situation seriously.

"Do you always look on the bright side of things?" Lois groused.

Clark grinned. "Besides, I got to spend a beautiful Sunday afternoon watching football with a smart and gorgeous woman. Now on the scale of one to ten for wasted days, this was no where near the bottom."

Lois blushed, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

"So what do you say that once we talk to your friend, Molly, we go out for dinner? My treat."

Lois grinned, slipping her arm through his. "Still protecting your virtue, I see, Mr. King."

"Naturally," Clark responded. "I'll have you know I'm not easy."

Lois laughed.

As they slipped into a comfortable silence, Clark silently rebuked himself. What was he doing? He should be working on getting the time machine repaired so that he could get out of here, not flirting with Lois.

No, he wasn't flirting with Lois. He was just being ... friendly. Okay, so then why had he almost kissed her back at Joe's car? If Joe hadn't come along when he had ...

It wasn't fair to her. What if she fell in love with him and then he simply disappeared? He might see her again almost immediately from his perspective. But even if he were successful in keeping her from going to the Congo and were even lucky enough to get her to fall in love with him in the future, from her viewpoint, at least six years would have passed before they would even meet. Six years where she would simply wonder what had happened to him.

No. He couldn't do this.

They stepped up to the door of the Alpha Nu Rho house and

Lois unlocked the door.

"Lois," he said quietly as she opened the door and stepped inside. "About supper ..." He took a step forward, following her into the house. She turned to look at him, removing his jacket and handing it back to him, and he hesitated. He had to break off this supper date, but how could he when he wanted nothing more than to spend every second he could in her presence?

"Well, look who's here?"

Clark was distracted from his attempt to break their date by the sound of a man's voice, not exactly friendly, but obviously directed at them. Both he and Lois turned towards the sound, Clark tensing in anticipation of trouble.

"Ryan," Lois responded, her voice cold.

"Hey, look who's here," he repeated to a couple of his chums who were also present. "Crusading reporter and resident slut of Alpha Nu Rho."

"Slut?" Lois asked, her eyes flashing in rising anger.

"You don't think I saw you Friday night?" He turned to his friends. "This woman got sloshed and then left to have a threesome with two guys she probably didn't even know. Do you even remember their names, Lois? And now you're with someone else. Just how many men have you screwed this weekend? Do you have any idea what a joke you're becoming?"

"You saw me leaving the party?" Lois asked, completely flabbergasted.

"You weren't exactly subtle. Hanging all over those guys like a cheap suit. It was pretty obvious what you were planning to do."

"And you thought I was drunk?"

"Thought? I knew you were drunk. I'd have to have been blind not to know that. You were so drunk you could barely stand up."

"And you just ..." She gestured vaguely. "... let them take me out of the party? Two guys I didn't know?"

"I'm not your father. Besides, as far as I'm concerned, if you drink that much, you deserve everything you get."

"You just let them take me out of the party?" Lois asked again, obviously having trouble grasping that fact.

"Of course I let them take you. What did you expect me to do?"

"How about coming to get me ..." Everyone turned at the sound of a new person entering the conversation.

"Mol ... ?" Ryan asked, obviously caught flat-footed at her appearance.

"How about telling me that my best friend might be in trouble?" Molly continued.

Clark noted that Molly was white as a ghost, but that did nothing to detract from the fact that she was rigidly furious.

"Look, Mol," Ryan said, holding his hands out in a consolatory fashion.

"Get out!" Molly said.

"You're taking her side?" Ryan asked. "She's a nosy, know-it-all, busy-body who can't hold her booze. She'd not worth it."

"She's an Alpha Nu Rho sorority sister. She's my best friend. And she has a right not to be attacked under this roof," Molly said. "Now take your friends and get out of here. You are no longer welcome in this house."

Molly stood up straight, shoulders back, eyes blazing as Ryan and his friends quickly gathered up their things and fled the house. As the door slammed shut behind them, Lois rushed over to her friend. "Mol?" she asked, even as she gathered the now trembling woman into her arms as Molly's tears finally started.

"You were right," she sobbed into Lois' shoulder. "You were so right about him. How could I not have seen it before?"

Lois glanced helplessly over her shoulder at Clark. "I'm sorry," she mouthed and Clark instantly knew that she was telling him dinner was off.

He gave her an encouraging nod as he backed towards the door.

Clark stood and looked at the time machine for a long time. Okay, so H.G. Wells' writing had been most unhelpful in understanding the actual machine. So what next?

Maybe it wasn't necessary for him to understand how the time machine worked to get it fixed. After all, he'd built the thing without understanding it in the first place.

He placed his glasses on the nightstand and picked up the plans, staring at it before staring at, into and through the machine, comparing the two. A few minutes later, he thought he'd spotted the problem. Stepping over to the machine, he opened a side panel and looked inside. Two of the wires had melted down, fusing together. But ... was this the cause or the effect? Had the meltdown been the reason for the problem or the result of the problem?

Either way, those wires were going to have to be replaced.

After a quick trip to a hardware store to get the items he required, he began his repair job.

Lois handed Molly a cup of hot chocolate before grabbing a blanket and curling up on the couch in the study with her friend.

Molly had cried herself out some time ago and now looked a bit like a little girl, lost in the blankets that surrounded her. It broke Lois' heart to see Molly looking so sad.

"I'm sorry," Lois said. "Maybe if I'd made more of an effort to get along with Ryan ..."

"No. Lois, this isn't your fault," Molly objected. "You and Ryan might not have gotten along, but I doubt you would have ever just stood by if it was obvious he was in trouble. Ryan ... I can't believe he had the nerve to say what he did to you."

Lois paused, lost in thought for a moment. "I still can't believe what he said. I mean, even if he would say it to me, why wouldn't he have worried about you overhearing him?"

"He thought I was upstairs in bed."

Lois waited for a more thorough explanation.

"When he came by last night to see me, I told him I wasn't feeling well. A cold or something." She shrugged. "I couldn't tell him that I was worried that he might have been the one who put GHB in your drink. And, given what you told me he'd said to you ... I guess I had my doubts."

"So he came by today. Brought chicken soup. I thought it was sweet." Her voice was almost disbelieving on the last statement, as if dismayed that she could ever have thought that. "When he realized I was up ... Well, he insisted that I get back in bed. I think he thought that's where I was. I just ..." Molly gave a heavy sigh. "How could I have been so wrong about him, Lois? After what he said ... it wouldn't surprise me if he was the one who put the GHB in your drink."

"Actually," Lois countered. "I don't think it was him."

"How can you say that? He was practically drooling over the idea that you'd been ... about what those two men were planning to do when you were so drunk you could hardly stand up on your own!"

"You're right. He was. But ... would he really have told me that, let me know that if he was involved with the whole thing?"

Molly gave that a moment to let that sink in. "So what are you thinking? The football players?"

Lois nodded. "Two men. Both Ryan and Charlie said I was leaving with two men. Everyone else I had run ins with at the party were by themselves."

Molly nodded.

"So ... how do you go about finding out?"

Lois thought about that for a moment before responding. "I need to search the football team's locker room. See if any of them have a stash of GHB. It might not prove anything, but at least it

would give me a place to start. We couldn't get in there today, but I was thinking of going back there tonight."

"But how would ...?" Molly's eyes widened. "You're planning to break in?" she asked in disbelief.

A smile spread across Lois' face. "Wanna come?" she asked.

Lois hesitated as she climbed into the car with Molly. Something ... some movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention. She glanced across the street, straining her eyes in the darkness to see what had caught her attention. As her eyes focused, she caught sight of the oddest thing.

A small man, wearing an old fashioned suit and a bowler hat was standing there, watching her. He tipped his hat when he noticed her looking at him.

What? Who was ... She blinked her eyes a couple of times, but when she looked back, to confirm what she had seen, he had vanished.

Taking one last look around, she climbed into the car, quickly dismissing the man from her mind. Maybe he was an actor from one of the local theater groups walking home after a performance.

Clark set down the screwdriver. He was finished with his repairs to the time machine. So ... now what? He supposed it might not work, but ... Didn't he at least have to try?

Yeah. He didn't belong here. He knew that. His purpose was to convince Lois Lane not to go to the Congo. This whole investigation into date rape drugs making one of their first appearances, so far as he could tell, would resolve itself. After all, Lois would live until at least 1993. He knew that. His job wasn't to protect her here. His job was to make sure to protect her when it really mattered.

Funny, though. He couldn't recall reading a story by Lois about date rape drugs. And he thought he'd read everything she'd ever published — some of her articles many, many times. Maybe she'd never found the proof she needed to ...

Or the idea had never occurred to her and so she'd never investigated it.

Damn! She'd been about to write off the whole thing as having too much to drink. He was the one who had raised the idea of someone slipping something into her drink. He was the one who had given her the names of various drugs that might have been used.

So ... had he already changed the future?

Okay, that was it. He had to leave. Go forward to 1993. Convince Lois not to go to the Congo. And then ... home where he couldn't disturb the time line any more than he already had.

He tossed his stuff into the machine, took a seat and flipped on the controls.

"I can't believe you're doing this," Molly said, glancing nervously around before looking back at Lois who was crouched at a back door into the stadium.

"What are you talking about?" Lois asked, a grin in her voice. "I'm not the only one here."

"Okay. I can't believe I'm doing this."

Lois giggled.

"How long is this going to take you?"

"Hey, calm down. I'm not exactly an expert at this yet."

"No kidding."

"Come on. Admit it. What would you rather be doing?"

Helping me break into the stadium or moping around the house."

When Molly didn't respond immediately, Lois glanced over at her.

"I'm thinking about it," Molly finally said.

Lois grinned.

"Yes!" Lois exclaimed, finally pulling the door open.

"Took you long enough," Molly responded as the two young women slipped inside.

"Hey! I'd like to see you try that. I tell you, Mol, these hands are magic. And don't roll your eyes," Lois added without looking back at Molly as the two of them jogged through the empty halls of the stadium.

"How do you know I rolled my eyes?"

"I know you."

Molly sighed. "Tell me you at least know where we're going."

"Yeah. I guess that's the one good thing that came out of today. I learned every way not to get to the Devils' locker room."

They came to a fork in the halls and Lois stopped, looking in both directions.

"Which way?" Molly asked.

Lois hesitated a moment before choosing to go right. "This way," she said, taking off at a jog once again.

"I really hope you're right about this."

"Of course I'm right. What could possibly go wrong?"

The voices were coming from up ahead, getting stronger with every step Lois and Molly took towards the locker room. Still, indistinguishable as to their content. But the voices were loud, angry. An argument of some kind?

A small shaft of light poured into the darkened hallway from the partially open door as Lois and Molly continued creeping forward. Lois was amazed that Molly was still with her, silent as the grave as they slid along next to the wall, desperate to hear what was going on. Lois took a deep breath, trying to calm the pounding of her heart in her ears.

A large bang caused both Lois and Molly to jump. It sounded like a body being slammed up against a locker.

"Hey, take it easy! I thought that's what you wanted!"

The voice was closer now, louder, and vaguely familiar. Where had she heard that voice recently? Frank! She was pretty sure that was Frank LaDuke's voice.

"What I wanted? Are you nuts? Why would I want that?"

"Look! Lane ruined our lives, Donny. She has to pay! That King chick, too. I think they were both working on this together. They have to learn that no one messes with us and gets away with it."

"No!"

Donny? Did he mean Donny Landover? No. Why would Landover be defending her or Linda? Lois came to a stop next to the partially opened door.

"But at the party you told Lane ..."

"I might not mind scaring her ... making her life miserable. King, either, for that matter. But I don't want any of you goons touching them!"

"But, Donny ..."

"Listen! All of you! No one touches Lane or King, got it?"

Lois took a deep breath before quickly moving to get a peak inside the room. Once she did, she retreated almost immediately back into the shadows. She was right. Frank was there. She'd seen him clearly enough — him and the large white bandages covering his arms. Must have been from injuries he'd sustained while doing a nosedive into the concrete earlier today. She couldn't say she minded that those bandages seemed to be covering 'a world of hurt.'

A number of others were present, too. She needed time to work out who else was there.

"But, Donny ..."

"Who do you think they're going to blame if something happens to them? Me, that's who. And I will not have any of you ruining my career. College football is great. But nothin' is keeping me out of the pros."

She quickly moved in for another look, but Frank was still

blocking her view. She darted back into the shadows. She'd give him a moment to move and then try again.

"They can't just get away with this."

One more try and Lois could now see that Landover was indeed there. Breathing hard, she pressed herself back against the wall of the hallway.

"They already have," Landover said. "Look ... do you think the pros are going to care if we wrote our own exams in college? Hell, no. They only care about the football. If something happens to Lane or King, however ... Think for once, Frankie! Think, all of you!"

"But the Sugar Bowl ... " one of the guys whined. The other guys all chimed in, griping about how Lane and King had ruined their chances of going to the Sugar Bowl.

For a time, it appeared that Landover had lost the argument until ...

"Shut up! All of you. Okay, let me make this simple. Any of you touch Lane or King, you'll answer to me. Got it."

The others must have got it because the room fell silent.

Lois looked back at Molly and by silent consent they slowly began their retreat. They had only gone a few yards when the door to the locker room suddenly opened as the football players prepared to leave. Lois and Molly froze.

Clark took one more look through the walls of the Alpha Nu Rho house. After setting the controls on the time machine, he'd realized that he had to see Lois — just one final time before jumping into the future. After thinking about it for a moment, he'd decided that no harm could come from such a decision. After all, he wouldn't talk to her again. No. He'd just take a look. One final look for the road, as it were. But when he'd arrived at the sorority house, Lois wasn't there. Neither was Molly for that matter.

He supposed they might have decided to go out somewhere, possibly to help Molly forget what had happened earlier in the day.

Suddenly, Clark's head snapped up. It took him a moment to recognize what he was hearing. A heartbeat. But not nearby. And not running at a normal rate either. This heart was pounding fast — too fast.

His eyes widened. "Lois," he whispered before he was suddenly airborne.

The ground suddenly trembled. Lois reached out, bracing herself against the wall behind her. Molly, it seemed, was doing the same.

"Earthquake!" one of the men yelled and instantly all of them were moving on unsteady feet out the door and down the hall away from Lois and Molly as they desperately ran towards the nearest exit.

When the ground finally quit shaking, Lois and Molly were alone in the hallway.

"Wow," Molly breathed.

Lois nodded her agreement. "An earthquake in Metropolis. Has that ever happened before?"

"Not that I know of."

They both took a moment to catch their breaths.

"So ... what now?" Molly finally asked.

"Well, since they were gracious enough to leave the locker room door open when they left ... "

"You mean when they bolted out of here like a bunch of frightened bunny rabbits?"

"Yeah, that's what I meant," Lois said with a grin. "Anyway, I say we take a look around the locker room while we've got the chance."

"You're right," Molly said when she and Lois stepped out of

the stadium some time later. "I do feel better."

"I told you," Lois said. "There is nothing like a little breaking and entering to make you forget about some jerk."

"I wonder if the same thing applies if you end up spending the night in jail," Clark said.

Both Lois and Molly spun towards him, eyes wide, hearts suddenly pounding.

"Or the hospital or morgue if you'd been caught by the football players," Clark added. On the flight over here, he'd realized that if he'd changed the past by giving Lois the information that had led her to pursue this investigation, there was no longer any guarantee that she would survive to 1993. The thought chilled him to the bone.

"Charlie!" Lois gasped. "What the hell are you doing — scaring us like that?" She put her hand over her heart to illustrate her point.

"Scaring you?" Clark gasped in disbelief, even as his eyes couldn't help but follow her hand to where it was resting. He quickly pulled his eyes back up to her now amused ones. "I'm not the one Frank chased all over the stadium earlier today!" he said, forcing them back to the subject at hand. "If you were planning to come back here, the least you could have done was to come and get me."

"Oh, don't be a worry-wart. We weren't in any danger. Were we Molly?"

"Not at all. Don't worry, Charlie. We just arranged for a little earthquake to happen at just the right moment and everything was fine."

Lois giggled.

Clark glared.

Molly giggled.

A moment later, both women were laughing uncontrollably.

Clark looked on in disbelief. If he'd found her a moment later or been unable to distract the football players by shaking the building ... He shuddered to think what the consequences might have been.

"Oh, lighten up, Charlie," Lois said. "We're fine. Now ... do you want to know what we found out or don't you?"

Clark closed his eyes for a moment. This woman was going to be the death of him.

"Well?" Lois asked, stepping up and taking his arm to drag him towards Molly's car.

"Fine," he said, finally relenting. "What did you find out?"

"So that's when we snuck into the locker room to take a look around," Lois concluded.

She, Molly and Charlie had all returned to the Alpha Nu Rho house before getting into a discussion about this evening's activities. Once they were all safely ensconced in the house's study, Lois had related the first part of their adventure to Charlie.

"Did you find anything in the locker room?" Charlie asked.

"Well, first we started by searching the lockers of anyone named in my story — figured they'd be the most likely suspects."

"After what Frank said, in particular," Molly added.

"Right," Lois responded. "But when we didn't find any GHB ... or any of the other things you told me about earlier today," she continued, looking at Charlie. "You know ... furniture stripper, drain cleaner, PH strips ... Well, that's when we expanded our search."

"So ... ?" Charlie asked.

"Nothing. Nada. If one of them has GHB, he doesn't leave it in his locker," Lois said. "On the other hand, if he is slipping it into women's drinks on a regular basis, he might want to keep it where it's more easily accessible."

"So what's your opinion of what we overheard," Molly asked. "From the conversation, it doesn't seem like Landover is involved."

"I agree," Lois said. "On the other hand, maybe Frank was. Maybe that's what Landover was so mad about."

"Couldn't he just have been upset with Frank for coming after you earlier today?" Charlie asked.

Lois sighed. "And so we're back to square one."

"Well, not exactly," Charlie said.

Lois glanced over at Molly. "Here it comes. The whole 'look for the silver lining' portion of the evening," she said teasingly.

"Well, if you don't want to know ... " Charlie said.

"No! Come on. Spill. So what is the silver lining in all this?"

"It seems both you and Linda King are out of danger from the football players now," Charlie responded. "And as far as silver linings go ... I'd say that's a pretty good silver lining."

"Assuming that the others listen to Landover," Molly said.

"I think they will," Charlie responded. When the two women just looked at him, as if waiting for more, Charlie continued. "In order to be a good quarterback, a person needs more than an ability to throw and call plays, he needs the ability to control his team. The quarterback is the leader, but they all have to work as a team to get the job done. From what you've said, the New Troy University Devils are having a very good year. That means Landover is doing a good job controlling his team. I'd be surprised if the guys go against him."

"Well, if that's true, that is good news," Lois said.

"One thing I don't understand," Molly said. "It seems as if you and Linda were both targets. But I haven't heard about anything happening to Linda. Why do you think that is?"

"Simple," Lois said. "Access. Linda left the party with Paul before the football players arrived. Then, she spent the night in jail."

"And she didn't show up at the football stadium this afternoon," Charlie added. "So Frank wasn't able to chase after her."

"And now she's out of danger ... After Landover's talk with the football players," Molly said.

"Not that she ever even knew she was in danger," Lois said. "Is it just me, or does anyone else wish she could have at least been scared witless?"

Clark bit back a smile while Molly nodded her agreement.

"Have you thought any more about when to tell everyone that there is a new danger out there and that they should watch their drinks?" Molly asked after a moment.

Lois let out a slow breath. "Not really. Problem is that once I go public with that aspect of it, I'm tipping off the culprit that I'm on to him, giving him a chance to cover his tracks. But ... " She thought for a minute. "Okay, well, the next edition of the Ink and Quill comes out next Friday. If I don't have everything before then, I'll write a piece for Friday's papers about a potential hazzard that might be out there. Since most partying takes place on the weekend ... How does that sound?"

She glanced around to see both Molly and Charlie nodding their approval. "Good. Then I guess ... " Before she could complete her thought, she interrupted herself by yawning.

"Well, it's getting late," Molly said.

"I should be heading back to the dorm," Lois responded. "I'll pick up on this again tomorrow after my classes." She rose to her feet, prompting Charlie and Molly to do the same.

"Do you think ... " Molly began, sounding a little hesitant.

"Well, would you consider staying here tonight, Lois?"

Lois' eyebrows crinkled together as she tried to discern the motive behind Molly's words.

"It's just ... Well, I'm feeling a lot better about what happened with Rye earlier, but ... "

"Of course I'll stay," Lois immediately responded, realizing that what her friend wanted was just someone around to keep her mind off Ryan in case she started obsessing. She glanced over at Charlie. "Why don't I walk you out?" she suggested.

A moment later, Lois was standing with Charlie just inside the front door while Molly got her room ready for company.

"So ... " Lois said.

"So ... " Charlie responded.

"Thanks for today," Lois said. "It was ... fun."

"It was," Charlie responded.

Then they both fell silent as the tension between them seemed to rise. Lois saw Charlie's eyes flick down to her lips and her mouth parted slightly, her heart rate picking up in anticipation. Was this it? Was he finally going to kiss her?

"Well, anyway ... Well, I should ... " Charlie said, backing towards the door.

"Right," Lois said, trying to quash her disappointment.

"So what time does your class get out tomorrow?" Charlie asked. "Maybe I could meet you and we could go to the coroner's office from there?"

Lois nodded before filling him in on the details.

Clark stared at the time machine for a long time. The longer he stayed in 1987, the harder the thought of leaving became. He had fallen in love with a bright and beautiful twenty year old woman and the thought of leaving her now, even if it was to jump forward in time in order to ensure that he didn't lose her in the future, left him feeling melancholy.

Should he say goodbye? After all, he had told her he'd meet her after class tomorrow. No. No, what if he said goodbye and this didn't work? How could he ever explain why he was still here? And as long as he was here, he knew without a doubt that he would be unable to resist seeing her again.

Besides, if the machine worked, he could always return and say goodbye then — couldn't he? After all, he had a time machine.

Satisfied with his reasoning, he again sat down in the machine, dropping some more of his gold into the fuel input valve and pushed the power button.

Sparks were flying almost immediately. Jumping from the machine, he blew cold air over the panel. The sounds of life coming from the machine died almost instantly. He sank down onto the side of the bed, stared at the frozen panel on the now dead machine and felt ... almost relieved.

The next few days developed into something of a pattern. Clark used the mornings while Lois was in class to continue his research into time travel.

He'd tried reading Einstein's theoretical writings on the subject. But without a science background, the information had been hard going. And in the end, he had to say that he still didn't really understand what he'd read.

So then he'd taken a flight out to Hill Valley, California, to talk to a Dr. Emmett Brown. He had discovered Brown was working on time travel when, in the future, Superman had saved Brown from what was apparently the latest attack by Libyan terrorists. From what Clark had been able to determine, the terrorist group had given Brown plutonium with instructions to build a bomb. He had double crossed them, giving them a bomb casing filled with used pinball machine parts, and used the plutonium for some sort of time travel experiment. Ever since, they had been trying to kill him.

Clark didn't think that Brown had actually been successful in his efforts to travel through time, but had hoped he might be able to interpret Well's blueprints.

At first, Clark had been optimistic. Brown had studied the plans as if he understood them. He'd even muttered something about it being a flux capacitor rather than a flux facilitator. However, when Clark had asked for clarification, Brown simply waved him off.

So when Brown looked up and said he had no idea what the

plans were all about, Clark had been surprised. Then Brown had launched into a lecture about how time travel was nothing but trouble and advising Clark to give up trying to invent it.

"Dr. Brown, please. If someone were stuck in the past, how would you advise them to get home?" Clark had asked.

Brown had simply muttered something incomprehensible about lightning, DeLorean sports cars and clock towers.

So Clark was pretty much back to square one in getting back to his own time.

Still, when Lois' classes finished for the day, Clark always found himself waiting outside her last class. The smile she gave him when she first spotted him would send his heart into overdrive. And when she'd take his arm and start immediately rambling on about some incomprehensible professor or stupid theory, his mouth would quirk into a smile and he'd find himself thinking that he'd never known such contentment.

They would eat lunch together at the university cafeteria where they would discuss their plans for the day regarding the investigation. However, on that front they hadn't made much more progress than Clark had regarding the time travel problem. But as Clark said, every angle that didn't work out was simply one more to cross off their list.

Their first stop on Monday had been to see the coroner, Dr. James Seymour. Lois had been forced to reveal more than she had originally wanted, namely that GHB had been slipped into her drink at a campus party, to convince the doctor to test Angelina Wesley's blood. But he had promised to do so and let them know what he found. So far, they had not heard back from him.

]From there, they had tried talking to Angelina's friends in an effort to retrace her steps on the night she'd died. They had discovered that she had a date that night, but no one seemed to know who she had been going out with. When she hadn't come home, her roommate had just assumed the date had gone better than expected. It wasn't until she'd received a visit from the police the next afternoon that she had even considered that something might be wrong.

The phrase the roommate had used, 'better than expected,' had originally intrigued Lois and Clark so they had probed further. It seemed that this was the first date Angelina had had during her two years at NTU. Apparently, although she was quite pretty, she was completely engrossed in her studies, turning away all potential suitors. She was pre-med, taking a science degree in hopes of being accepted into medical school the following year. She did nothing but work, even taking summer courses rather than having her summers off for relaxation and enjoyment. So her roommate had found it slightly odd that Angelina had not been more excited considering that she must have liked this guy an awful lot to break her 'no dating' rule.

On the other hand, Angelina had never been the overly demonstrative type and was always a private person so when she hadn't come home that night, her roommate had just figured she was reading Angelina wrong.

Seeing no further avenues to explore there, Lois and Clark had inquired as to whether Angelina had any friends or enemies among the New Troy University Devils, but so far had found no connection. Apparently, she was too engrossed in her studies to give football a second thought.

Lois and Clark had even asked the roommate to look at their list of potential suspects to see if any of the names seemed familiar, but none had.

Not having found anything approaching it from Angelina's perspective, Lois and Clark had turned their attention to their list of suspects, attempting to track their movements on the night of Angelina's death — looking to discover how many had alibis so that they could cross them off the list. But that had only eliminated one football player who had been in the hospital as a

result of an injury he'd received during football practice earlier in the day.

Lois had even put in a call to Cat Grant, in hopes that she might have heard something. But that had been a bust as well. Since the football story had come out and even though her name had not been used in the article, Ms. Grant was concerned about being seen as having any connection to the story.

Still, regardless of how frustrating an afternoon was, Clark would eat supper with Lois where they discussed everything and anything not having a bearing on the story. Then they would head back to her sorority house where the discussions would continue. They got into spirited debates, theoretical discussions and even talked about dreams or hopes for the future. Avoiding telling her too much personal information was difficult at times, but she seemed to accept his skirting certain subjects, never pressing too hard. On one occasion, they'd even watched a video with Molly and a few other women in the house. Clark had felt as if he was in heaven when, half way through the video, Lois had curled up against him. As the evening ended, Clark would walk Lois to her dorm, say goodnight and go back to his room to dream about the most amazing woman he'd ever known.

But on Thursday, when Lois met him following her class, she had a new sparkle in her eyes.

"What?" Clark asked.

"I just got a message from Molly."

Clark raised his eyebrows.

"The coroner called. He wants to see us."

Lois glanced over at Charlie as the two of them walked up the steps to the coroner's office. So far the investigation wasn't going nearly as well as she'd hoped. On the other hand, she wasn't sure that she didn't sort of relish the time it was taking. After all, once it was over, would Charlie leave? Was that why he'd stayed so long in 1987 — because he wanted to help her with this investigation. Her heart ached at the thought of losing him. How was it that she'd managed to become so attached to him in just a week?

She sighed slightly causing Charlie to glance over at her.

"Problem?" he asked.

"No. Just thinking about how slowly this investigation seems to be going."

"Sometimes investigations are like that. Don't worry. Something is bound to break soon. Maybe even right now." On the last words, he opened the door to the building, allowing Lois to step through before him.

She fought the urge to sigh again. That was exactly what had her so depressed.

Spending time with Charlie this past week had been wonderful. She loved working next to him, bouncing ideas off him, having serious and frivolous debates with him and just generally being around him. And the thought that she was going to lose him was slicing into her heart.

She suspected he shared some of her feelings. But so far, he'd been very careful not to act on them. Since Sunday, when he'd almost kissed her on three different occasions, he hadn't come close again. When he walked her back to her dorm at night, she could almost feel him shutting down, closing himself off to her and that moment where a goodnight kiss might be natural, as if he feared what he might do, how he might complicate things if ever they kissed. But sometimes ... it was a look she would catch in his eye or the gentleness of his touch ... It told her that he thought of her as more than just a friend.

Still, she longed for his kiss, sat in boring lectures and fantasized about his kiss, imagining the taste, the texture, the sounds, the feelings. Would his kiss be soft and tender or demanding and urgent? Or would it vacillate between the two? Would he pull her hard against him or would he hold her as

gently as if she were spun glass? Would he just kiss her or would he want to be certain that she was ...

"Lois?"

"Huh?" Lois asked, pulled out of her thoughts by the sound of Charlie's voice.

"I just asked if you were ready for this."

Ready? Ready for what? She glanced around, realizing suddenly that he was about to knock on the door to the Dr. James Seymour's private office. "Ready," she assured him, even as a blush rose in her cheeks.

The coroner wasn't what Lois had expected. He was young and far too chipper to work with dead bodies every day.

"So ... let me get right to the point," Dr. Seymour began the instant she and Charlie were seated. "You were right. The reason it took me so long to get back to you was because we had to exhume the body. But once I tested her blood and found exaggerated levels of GHB, I wanted to reexamine the body to see if the GHB was what actually killed her."

"I thought GHB worked its way out of the system fairly quickly," Charlie said.

"Oh, it does. But that is assuming the individual is alive. No, it was tricky, but I did get enough evidence to be satisfied that she died of an overdose of GHB."

Lois let out a breath. So she wasn't the first victim. Did that mean the culprit had put GHB in her drink with the intent of killing her? She shivered.

As if sensing her thoughts, Charlie reached over and gently squeezed her shoulder.

"So can I get a quote from you about the cause of death?"

Lois asked, pulling out her tape recorder.

"Certainly," the doctor said. He waited until Lois pressed the record button before continuing. "After running the necessary tests, I am confident that ..." He sorted around on his desk for a moment, as if looking for something. "... Angelina Wesley ..." Obviously, he'd forgotten the name of the victim. "... died of a GHB overdose. And, although I am unable to say how the GHB was introduced into Miss Wesley's system, given that this is not the only known case of GHB poisoning ... And I'm referring to you here, Miss Lane," he added, looking at Lois. "... at New Troy University, I strongly advise all young women attending New Troy University to watch their drinks when out in public until such time as the source of this problem can be determined."

Seemingly satisfied with his statement, he sat back and gave a slight nod.

Clark sat on the corner of Lois' desk, looking around the cluttered room that served as the bull pit of the Ink and Quill while Lois typed furiously at her computer.

He had to admit, he was proud of her. Publishing a story informing the campus that Angelina Wesley had died of GHB poisoning and warning women not to leave their drinks unattended might make their job of getting to the culprit more difficult. Still, it was the right thing to do. The ease with which Lois had come to that decision only made him love her more.

"So what do you think?" she asked, finally pulling her story out of the typewriter and handing it to him.

"New Danger to Women at University 'By Lois Lane

'A new and as yet unidentified, drug has left two women, at New Troy University, helpless and in a position to be victimized.

'According to the Metropolis coroner, Dr. James Seymour, one of the students, Angelina Wesley, died as the result of having the drug in her system.

'The second woman, who asked to remain anonymous, said that she believed that the drug had been placed in her drink when she left her drink unattended at a college party on the New Troy University campus.

'She acted as if she were drunk, but then remembered nothing

the next morning.

'Metropolis coroner, Dr. Seymour, said that Ms. Wesley died as a direct consequence of ingesting this unidentified drug and strongly advised young women attending New Troy University to watch their drinks when out in public.'

Clark opened his mouth to make a few suggestions before closing it again. Lois didn't know he was a reporter. And besides, this was her story. And truth be told, it was pretty good. And he was confident her editor would be able to give her some direction to fill in the gaps. Still..

"I'm just curious as to why you refer to it as an unidentified drug. We know we're talking about GHB here."

"I'm not really wanting to let the bad guys know we have that information yet. And I figure, it isn't really important to identify the drug to warn women to watch their drinks."

"Then why not just say that? Tell the reader that they should watch their drinks because there is reason to suspect that drinks are being spiked."

"Because I want people to take it seriously. And letting them know that there is more than one person who was given this drug and that one of the people actually died might accomplish that."

Clark nodded slowly. "Still ... you do realize that when the culprit ... "

"Or culprits."

"Or culprits read this, with your by-line on it, they are going to know that you're on to them."

"So you are worried that I'll be putting myself back in danger?"

Clark nodded.

"Well, that's what I keep you around for," she said playfully, rising to her feet. "Now, just give me a moment to let Paul read through it and then we can get out of here. I was thinking I'd like to take a trip down to the club where Angelina's body was found, snoop around a bit, maybe ask some questions."

"What do you mean, no?" Lois asked in disbelief.

"Exactly what you think I mean," Paul responded. "This isn't news. It's gossip."

"Gossip?" Lois gasped.

"What facts are in this article? A woman died with an unidentified drug in her system. Other than that, this whole thing is nothing but speculation. Go out and get me a real story. Or better yet ... I need someone to cover the exhibit the art students are putting on this weekend."

"Paul, this is important. Women need to know that they are in danger of having their drinks spiked."

"They are? That's more than this article tells me. Some woman 'believes' something may have been slipped into her drink. The other woman can't tell us anything because she's dead. Sorry, Lane. This is my call. And I say no. I'm not going to start a panic on campus without solid proof."

"Look, if this is your way of getting back at me for accusing your new girlfriend of stealing my story ... "

"About that ... Linda told me what happened. She said that you were both looking into the story and you were just mad because she got there first."

"What!" Lois exclaimed.

"And I think because of that, because you were scooped on one of the biggest stories ever to run in the Ink and Quill, you're trying to create bigger and better stories."

"That's not ... "

"So ... I'm going to forget you ever tried to submit this garbage as news." He dumped the story into the trash can. "And I'm assigning you to cover the art exhibit this weekend and telling you to give up on this supposed story. Now ... is that all?"

Lois stared at him dumfounded for a moment before reaching down to snatch her story out of the garbage can. After glaring at

Paul once more, she spun around, storming out of the editor's office and slamming the door behind her.

She glanced around, looking for Charlie, only to feel her heart drop into her stomach with what greeted her eyes. Linda, it seemed, had noticed Charlie and was currently flashing her baby blues at him.

Fortifying herself for another heartache, she began walking towards them. After all, what man would even try to resist what Linda was so obviously offering?

"Later then," Linda said, patting Charlie's chest before heading in Lois' direction.

"Tired of Paul already?" Lois asked sarcastically.

"Oh, hi, Lois. What?"

Lois gestured in Charlie's direction.

"Oh, him." She shrugged. "One has nothing to do with the other."

Lois' eyebrows rose.

"Well, I might want to be on Paul's arm at the ceremony for the Krebb Awards this year. But he's not exactly ... Well, maybe he's not quite everything I expected. And I figure what he doesn't know won't hurt him." She winked at Lois and sashayed away, leaving a stunned Lois behind.

'Not quite everything I expected.' The words suddenly sank in and Lois' mouth fell open. Was there something to Molly's comment about Paul being bad in bed after all?

Still, why did that mean she had to set her sights on the man that Lois ... The one Lois ... On Charlie? Her eyes left Linda to slowly swing back to Charlie as she fought back tears. Not again. Please, not again. Not Charlie. She could handle it if it were anyone but Charlie.

Clark's eyebrows crinkled together in confusion. He knew who Linda King was, of course. He'd been dodging her advances at the Daily Planet for the past few months now and was tired of it. And he had listened in on the conversation between Lois and Linda. But surely Lois wouldn't be upset about ...

Suddenly, understanding sunk in. Linda had just recently stolen a story and a guy from Lois. She must be concerned that it was about to happen again. So ...

He plastered a smile on his face and rose to his feet, walking over to where Lois was standing.

"You couldn't have been a few minutes earlier?" he asked.

"What?" Lois responded, obviously confused.

"I could have used some saving. That woman is a barracuda. Does she even understand the meaning of the word no?" He injected as much annoyance into his voice as he could. Not that it was a particularly difficult feat. Annoyance was pretty much how he felt about Linda.

"Not a word she's heard ... or used a lot," Lois responded, finally seeming to relax.

"Yeah, well, she better get used to it because that's the only word she's ever going to hear from me."

He was rewarded by a smile from Lois.

"So ... all done?" Clark asked, changing the subject from Linda King. "Did your editor make any changes to your story?"

"Paul? He's not interested in changes. In fact, he's not interested in the story at all."

"What?" Clark asked. "How could he not ..."

"Said it was nothing more than speculation. Then, instead of telling me to get more facts, he accused me of making up the story and assigned me some stupid fluff piece."

"But ... what about warning women that there is a danger out there?"

"What danger? According to Paul, there is no danger. Come on. I've got to get out of here." She grabbed her backpack and stormed towards the door to the paper.

He followed, letting her burn off some of her excess energy.

He waited until she stepped out of the building before reaching out and grabbing her arm to bring her to a halt. "There are other ways of getting your information out there," he said.

"What are you suggesting? That we print up a bunch of posters and put them up on all the bulletin boards, plaster them to telephone poles, hand them out as ..."

"No. I was thinking more of the Daily Planet."

"What?" Lois asked. "You think I should send my story to the Daily Planet?"

"No. I think you should go see Perry White — take your story to him personally, make him understand how important it is to warn women of a potential danger out there. Sell the importance of this story to him."

She swallowed hard. "You want me to just walk into the Daily Planet and insist on talking to the editor of the greatest newspaper in the world?"

Clark smiled. "What do you have to lose?"

She couldn't believe she was doing this — that she had walked into the Daily Planet and told the receptionist she needed to talk to Perry White. Even more unbelievable was that when the receptionist called to tell Mr. White that there was a Lois Lane here to see him, he had apparently said to send her right up. That was how she found herself in an elevator heading up to the newsroom and the office of Perry White late on this Thursday afternoon.

Perry looked up from his desk when he heard the elevator ding, announcing its arrival on the floor of the newsroom. Leaning back in his chair, he watched a young woman step off and look around. Not quite the image he'd created of the pit bull Henderson had described. She looked more like a frightened rabbit.

He was curious about what she would do now, so he sat there watching as she stopped Ralph, the copy boy. He suspected she was asking directions. A short exchange took place after that, but it was one that completely intrigued Perry.

He didn't know what Ralph had said to the young woman, but knowing Ralph, he could imagine. He watched in fascination as the frightened rabbit disappeared. A moment later Ralph was practically limping away from the encounter. A smile spread across Perry's face.

He continued to watch as she brushed off the encounter with Ralph, straightened her clothing and, after taking a deep breath, lifted her chin and began walking towards his office. She must still be nervous, but one could no longer tell from looking at her, as if the encounter with Ralph, rather than shaking her, had given her a much needed shot of adrenalin.

He rose to his feet, arriving at his door just before she did.

"You must be Lois Lane," he said, offering her his hand. He was pleased when she shook it firmly. "Come on in." He gestured her to a chair before closing the door and returning to his desk.

"So, Ms. Lane," he said as he took a seat on the corner of his desk, "what can I do for a freshman in the journalism program at New Troy University?"

Her eyes widened. She obviously hadn't expected him to know who she was. She quickly pushed her surprise aside, however, to focus on the reason for her visit. "It's Lois, please. And I have a story for the Daily Planet," she said, pulling a large brown envelope out of her backpack.

"So why are you offering it to the Planet? Shouldn't you be taking it to the Ink and Quill?"

"I did. They didn't want it."

Perry got up from the corner of his desk and slid around behind it to take a seat in his chair, using the time to digest this information. "So what would make you think that the Planet would be interested if the Ink and Quill isn't?"

"Because the Daily Planet stands for truth and justice. Because the Daily Planet believes in giving voice to those without a voice, in protecting those who can't protect themselves, in ..."

Perry White raised his hand, cutting her off. "I think I know what the Daily Planet stands for," he said, amusement in his voice. "Although, I'm not sure I've heard our finer qualities argued quite so passionately before." He was rewarded when the young woman seated on the other side of his desk blushed. "So which is this?" he asked, gesturing to the envelope. "Truth, justice, giving voice or providing protection?"

Her blush deepened and she squirmed slightly. But when she finally spoke, her voice, although soft, was also strong, the strength of one who possessed the conviction of her words. "Mr. White, I've come across information that indicates that women at New Troy University are facing a new danger. It has already resulted in the death of one woman. And I think it's absolutely critical that women are made aware of this new threat before heading into another weekend."

"If this is true, I can't believe the Ink and Quill wouldn't want this story. Any idea why they weren't interested?"

Lois shifted uncomfortably. "I guess you'd have to ask them."

Perry clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. She had her suspicions about what the problem was, but she wasn't about to share them. Could this be connected with what had happened when she'd had her recent story stolen? Perry knew all about the role politics played at a newspaper — even one on a college campus.

"Okay, so what's the story?"

Lois looked at him for a moment, as if trying to come to some sort of decision. She looked down again at the envelope and then back at him. "If I show you this ... What's to stop you from simply assigning one of your own reporters to look into it and write up their own story?"

"Nothing whatsoever," Perry responded.

She hesitated for a moment before sighing. "This information needs to get out before the weekend." With that, she handed the envelope over to Perry.

He looked at her for a moment before directing his attention to the envelope. By her comments, she was concerned that for a second time, she was going to have her story stolen. Yet she was an idealist. She believed that it was more important to protect her fellow students than it was to protect her story.

Opening the envelope, he removed the contents, leaning back in his chair and reading through it slowly before reading it once again.

"I assume you've got evidence to back this up," Perry finally said, looking back at Lois.

Taking a deep breath, Lois reached into her back pack, removing another envelope and her tape recorder. After hesitating a moment more, she handed them to Perry.

After reading the document in the envelope, he understood her final hesitation. "You're the woman who wishes to remain anonymous?" he asked when he saw the name on the top of the report on the drug test.

She nodded.

He filed that information away as he listened to the taped statement from the coroner.

Why hadn't he said anything? No praise. No criticism. Just ... nothing. Instead, after listening to the coroner's tape, he'd picked up a blue pencil and begun making marks on her story.

She sat up straighter to see what he was writing. He had crossed out a few words here and there, written in others and circled 'unidentified drug' both times it appeared.

Then he'd scribbled something she couldn't read from this

angle at the bottom. Finally, just when she was certain she was going to climb out of her skin, he looked up at her again.

"Okay," he began slowly. "First things first. Were you hurt?"

The question surprised her. "Uhh ... No. Other than my pride. But my guardian angel was looking out for me." To his confused expression, she shrugged sheepishly. "Sorry. Inside joke. No, a friend took me home and put me to bed."

"I'd like a quote from her ... or him."

"And if she doesn't want to be identified either?"

"Not a problem. But it would strengthen your story to provide a witness to the second incident. Besides, how can you say you were acting drunk if you don't remember anything? You need someone who saw how you were acting to say that."

Lois nodded.

"Now ... why do you believe someone slipped this drug into your drink?"

"It tasted salty. I was told that this drug can have a salty taste to it, depending on what type of drink it is added to. I didn't think much about it at the time, but when I realized afterwards that I had been drugged, it was the only logical conclusion."

Perry nodded. "Okay, I want you to add something about the reason for your belief. Not in detail, but just that it tasted salty."

"But I've also been told that sometimes people won't even taste the drug and I don't want people thinking that if they just taste their drinks carefully, they will be okay."

Perry let out a slow breath before nodding. "Okay, I'll let that one go. We'll leave it vague as to why you think it was slipped into your drink, but add in something about having blood tests done which confirms you having been drugged. And change the word 'believes' to 'maintains.' Same difference, but it sounds better. Or at least ... I assume you maintain that was how you ingested the drug."

Lois nodded.

"Also," Perry continued. "... the warning from the coroner would be stronger if you made it a direct quote."

"Okay."

"Now ... for the big issue. Why call it an unidentified drug? The coroner and your blood tests both clearly identify it as something called GHB."

Lois shifted again. "Well, I'm sort of ... still pursuing that angle and ..."

"You don't want the person responsible to know how much you know," Mr. White said. "So do I take that to mean you're still investigating to find out who is behind these attacks?"

She nodded.

He studied her for a long moment as he considered that.

"Okay, you get a quote from your friend, backing up your version of events, add something about your blood tests and change the warning from the coroner into a direct quote. Also, I would be more comfortable calling it ..." Perry hesitated as he thought for a moment. "Call it 'a mind-altering' drug rather than 'unidentified' — since it is identified. We just won't be the ones to name it."

"Then, I'll run it in tomorrow's paper," Perry continued. "I'll even put it on the front page to make sure as many people as possible see it. It won't be the lead, but I will put it above the fold. Between that and the way news travels on a university campus, I'm sure word will spread quickly enough."

Lois stared at him in disbelief.

"However ..." he continued, holding up his hand. "... I have a caveat. The Daily Planet has the right of first refusal of any follow up story. If you find out who is responsible, that story is given to us first."

Lois was about to agree when she hesitated. Paul might have refused this story, but she still held a press pass that claimed she was a student reporter for the Ink and Quill. She groaned. So close. She'd been so close.

"I'm sorry, Mr. White," she said, rising to her feet. "I think this story should get out there — preferably before the weekend. Women need to know about this. But I don't have the right to promise you my follow up story. I still work for the Ink and Quill." She began to gather up her evidence regretfully. Hopefully, Charlie, Molly and maybe even some of her other sorority sisters would help her put up posters.

"Lois," Mr. White said just as she was about to leave the room. "Use a phone out there to get that quote from your friend. Find an empty desk and make the corrections I'm requesting. Then, when you have a follow up, come see me. Let me talk to the editor at the Ink and Quill — see if he will agree to a joint release of the story."

"And if he doesn't agree?" Lois asked, trying to keep control of the hope suddenly rising in her chest.

"Then he's a fool." Perry took a breath before continuing. "If that's the case, the Daily Planet will lose out. But I think I can get him to agree. I'm assuming the police will become involved as soon as you get the necessary evidence. And once that happens, someone will pick up on it. And since the Ink and Quill only publishes once a week, the best way to ensure that they are given credit for this story is to agree to have the Daily Planet print it, giving due credit to the Ink and Quill. And even if the story breaks next Thursday evening, given the fact that the Daily Planet has a much wider audience ... Yes, Lois, I think I can get him to agree. So ... do we have a deal?"

Lois' face almost split in two from the smile that spread across it. "We have a deal, Mr. White."

"Call me Perry."

She quickly nodded, before rushing out of his office to look for a phone and an empty desk.

"Lois," Perry said, causing her to look back at him expectantly. He was now standing in the doorway to his office. "Two more things."

She stopped, confused.

"First, don't you want to know how much we pay for freelance articles?"

Her eyes widened. Not only was she going to have a story on the front page of the Daily Planet, but he was offering to pay her for it? Was he serious?

"What do you say to ... seventy-five dollars?"

"Yes. Absolutely," she said immediately.

He grinned. "You should have held out. I was prepared to go as high as a hundred dollars. It is an exclusive, after all."

"But ... "

"And second," he continued before she could get another word out, "that story you wrote about the college football players not writing their own exams ... good hustle."

"How ... "

"I didn't become editor of the world's greatest paper because I can yodel," he responded, before walking back to his office with a, "lay ee odl lay ee odl lay hee hoo"

Lois stared down at the hundred dollar cheque that had appeared on the corner of desk she was using to make the changes to her story that Mr. Whit ... Perry had requested. A cheque with 'The Daily Planet' in bold letters across the top. A cheque made out to her. She wasn't entirely sure she would cash it. Maybe she would just frame it — along with her story.

She forced herself to push that thought aside. Before worrying about the proceeds from her story, she needed to finish her story. She read through her final version once more.

'New Danger to Women at University' By Lois Lane

'A new, mind-altering drug has left two women at New Troy University helpless and in a position to be victimized.

'According to the Metropolis coroner, Dr. James Seymour, one of the students, Angelina Wesley, died as the result of having

the drug in her system.

'The second woman, who asked to remain anonymous, maintains that the drug was placed in her drink when she left it unattended at a college party on the New Troy University campus.

'She said that she only had one drink and remembered nothing more after that, but after doing blood tests was informed that she had tested positive for the drug.

'Her friend, also a student on campus, and wishing to remain anonymous, said, "My friend only had one drink that I knew of and she began acting very drunk and very seductive. We took her home and put her to bed. In the morning, she didn't remember anything."

'Seymour had a warning for women at NTU. "I strongly advise all young women attending New Troy University to watch their drinks when out in public," Seymour said.'

Satisfied that this was the best she could do, she returned to Perry's office. A few minutes and some brief additional corrections by Perry and she was done. She carefully stowed her cheque between the pages of one of her textbooks to be sure it wouldn't get crinkled before heading out of the newsroom.

Clark spotted Lois the instant she emerged from the Daily Planet. He hadn't gone in with her since he didn't want to change the timeline by meeting Perry in 1987 instead of 1993 when he would first be interviewed for the Daily Planet. Besides, he had been confident that Lois could handle it, and should handle it, on her own. It was Lois' story after all. And her moment of glory.

He smiled when she spotted him across the street. To be honest, he'd seen her even before she emerged. He'd been sneaking peaks inside periodically ever since she'd first gone inside. He hadn't listened, however. It had felt like it would be too much an invasion of her privacy. But when he'd seen her working to revise her story, he knew she'd been successful in convincing Perry to print it.

Not that he hadn't figured it was a sure thing even before then. He might not know the Perry White of this time. But he did know the one of 1997. And the Perry he knew would want to make sure that the women of New Troy University knew of this new danger.

But even if he hadn't known she had been successful, one look at her face would have given the game away. She was beaming.

"Charlie!" she yelled.

He had only taken a couple of steps towards her before she was running towards him at full speed. He braced himself just as she threw herself into his arms. She was talking a mile a minute, too. So fast, Clark was only able to pick up every other thought.

How they had ended up kissing, Clark wasn't certain. One minute, he'd been laughing as he'd held her, reveling in her joyous babble. And the next, his mouth was exploring hers with a passion he'd only dreamt existed until now.

Thought didn't exist. The reasons for not doing this didn't matter. All that mattered was her. He groaned and gave in, his need and love for the woman in his arms becoming his sole focus. The feel of her body in his arms. The perfect combination of curves, spirit and passion.

She couldn't get close enough. Their bodies entangled. Their mouths and tongues dueling with each other. His hands on her back, hers running through his hair. She thought she'd been kissed before; she was wrong. Never had a kiss been like this. All her senses were suddenly alive. His taste. His touch. His feel. His smell. All of it was quickly becoming part of her, making her feel as if she were alive for the very first time in her twenty years.

Had he kissed her? Had she kissed him? She didn't know and didn't particularly care. That they were standing on a public street

while the sun set over Metropolis was irrelevant. Nothing existed in her universe except the man holding her in his arms.

She moaned, moving against him, desperately searching for more.

And suddenly, he wasn't there.

She gasped, struggling to keep her balance when she found herself standing on the street, Charlie about ten feet away.

"I'm sorry," Charlie gasped. "I shouldn't have ... It's not ... I just ..."

"Charlie?" she asked.

"I've got to go," Charlie said.

She watched in complete confusion when he began backing away and then ... a gust of wind and he was gone.

"Charlie?" she asked again when she suddenly found herself standing alone across the street from the Daily Planet.

PART FOUR

'To Love And To Cherish'

Lois stood in stunned silence across the street from the Daily Planet. Well, that certainly answered the question of how fast Charlie could move.

She barely noticed as the sun set and the street lights began slowly blinking on. At first, she was hurt. And then, angry.

Her first instinct was to say that if he didn't want her, then she didn't want him even more. With that thought in mind, she began stomping through the streets of Metropolis on her way back to NTU. Men were pigs. What did she need them for anyway?

But that thought only sustained her for a time. Soon, she was thinking about his face, his eyes, the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand, his kiss ... Most definitely his kiss. His lips, soft but strong, moist but dry, insistent but tender. The way she responded to him, heart, soul and body. In all of her imaginings about what it would be like to kiss Charlie, never had she envisioned anything like that.

Besides, whereas other men might be pigs, Charlie wasn't. He was sweet and gentle and strong and smart and his touch was all it took to awaken emotions that, until now, had existed for her only in romance novels. What she felt for him made what she had felt for Paul seem meaningless in comparison. In fact, since Charlie had first walked into her life, Paul had barely crossed her mind — as if Paul were a mere footnote in the history of Lois Lane. A history in which Charlie played a dominant part.

It was then that the truth sunk in.

"I'm in love with Charlie King," she said, her feet coming to a complete stop, unaware of the people having to step around her as she stood motionless in the middle of a busy sidewalk. It was a revelation, but it wasn't, as if some part of her had always known that one central truth.

Her mind flashed from one moment to another of her time with Charlie. Her first glimpse of him when he'd caught her falling from that tree when she was nine. That embarrassing moment where he'd first entered the kitchen at the Alpha Nu Rho house. That electric filled moment outside his motel room when she'd first become aware of ... something between them. Eating hotdogs at the ball park. Trying to sneak past security guards at the stadium. Batting around ideas for approaching the investigation. Falling asleep on his shoulder while watching a video. Moments of fun. Moments of tenderness. Moments of excitement and passion. Until finally, her mind settled on that kiss.

The kiss that had changed the world as she knew it. He had felt it, too. She knew he had.

As soon as that realization sunk in, there was only one option open. To find him. To insist that he talk to her. To take as long as it took to hammer this out.

Because if there was one thing she knew for certain it was

that she was not about to let Charlie King go without a fight.

Clark paced his motel room in frustration. How could he have done that? Kissing Lois had been ... wonderful ... amazing ... mind-blowing ... life-changing ... and a mistake. Definitely a mistake.

The crazy thing was that he'd never even seen it coming. One minute, they'd been celebrating. A moment later, they'd really been celebrating.

But he couldn't do this to Lois. She didn't know. Didn't understand that he couldn't stay. He had to get back to his own time and the second he figured out how to fix the time machine, he would. Starting something with her now would be completely unfair to her. If he had any integrity at all, he'd make certain never to see her again — at least until he could continue what he'd had accidentally started tonight. He would take the time machine to that deserted tropical island and stay there until he figured out how to fix it. He would leave tonight and not look back.

He also shouldn't have flown out of there. She had to have noticed how quickly he'd left. On the other hand, if he hadn't, if he'd stood there for one more second, he knew he'd have been back in her arms. And ... what then?

Someone knocking at the door stopped him in his tracks.

What now? He'd paid the manager for a week when he'd first arrived, recognizing that it would likely take some time to get the time machine working. But that meant he was paid up until tomorrow. So if the manager was wanting next week's payment ...

Taking a moment to throw the tarp over the time machine and tying it down, he walked over to the door and threw it open, freezing in his tracks when he saw who was standing on the other side.

"Lois," he breathed.

"Do you want to tell me what that was all about out there, Charlie?" Lois demanded, pushing her way past him to enter his room.

"Lois, I'm ... " he said, glancing at the door, as if unsure what to do with it, before deciding to close it.

"I don't want to hear it," she said, cutting him off. "I know you feel something for me. I know I'm not wrong about that."

"You ... " He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

She couldn't help notice how cute he looked without his glasses, even as her mouth continued spouting words. "You kissed me, Charlie. I mean you really kissed me. It wasn't just me and I won't allow you to pretend it was. And then you just ... " She made a wavy gesture with her hands. "And I want to know what that was all about?"

"Lois, I ... "

He closed his eyes, his hands now rubbing his temples. He appeared to be getting a headache, not that Lois was going to let a little headache stop her.

"And don't feed me any bull about how you just had to leave either. If there was some reason you didn't think we should be kissing, you could have stopped and told me. You could have said, 'Lois, we can't be kissing because I'm married. Sorry I forgot to mention that little detail this past week, but it just sort of slipped my mind.' Or you could have said, 'Lois, we can't be kissing because ... Charlie!'" she exclaimed when he suddenly doubled over, holding his head in his hands.

She rushed to him just in time to catch him as he collapsed onto the floor. Or, well, sort of catch him. He was heavier than she'd expected and all she was able to do was to slow his fall so that he didn't hurt himself when he landed.

Her hand went to his forehead to brush off a strand of hair,

causing her to realize that he was burning up. "Charlie, what's wrong?" she asked. "How can I help?"

"Lois ..."

His voice was soft and strangled, as if it were an effort to get out just the single word. His knees came up to his chest and he groaned, holding himself as if trying to keep himself from being torn apart.

He needed help.

"I'm going to call 9-1-1," she said, preparing to rise.

"No!" The gasped command was accompanied by him grabbing her wrist.

"But, Charlie ..."

"No! No doctors!"

His grasp on her wrist, which was almost painful, relaxed.

"No doctors," he breathed this time, before seeming to turn in on himself once again.

Lois sank back down next to him, torn. And terrified. He wanted no doctors. That was abundantly clear, but ...

"How can I help you?" she asked, running her fingers through his increasingly damp hair.

He didn't answer, completely lost to her at this moment. Not knowing what else to do, she quickly rose to her feet and rushed into the bathroom. Grabbing a towel, she soaked it in cool water before returning to Charlie. Sinking back to the floor next to him, she began gently using the towel to wipe the hot sweat from his face, his brow, his neck, everywhere where his skin was exposed.

His body shook as tremor after tremor seemed to ripple through him. He finally relaxed against her and she started to breathe again. His breathing calmed and he became peaceful.

When he finally started to rouse, she experienced a moment of pure joy. The relief was almost palpable, as if it were a third person in the room with them.

"Charlie," she whispered, even as she helped him move into a seated position.

The completely exhausted look he gave her tore at her heart.

"Do you think you can move onto the bed?" she asked.

"Give me a moment," he replied, closing his eyes.

"What happened?" She didn't want to push, not when he was still so weak, but she had to know.

"It's nothing."

Nothing? What she had just witnessed might be a lot of things but 'nothing' wasn't one of them.

"A headache," he added.

"Charlie, I've had headaches before and that ..."

"It's nothing, Lois," he interrupted.

She let out a breath. Well, now was not the time to pursue this, not when he was so weak. But she would get to the bottom of it. For now ...

"How about we get you into bed," she said, instantly blushing when she registered the words.

For a moment, he was silent. Finally, he nodded.

Even working together, it took her some time to get him settled. Helping him remove his jacket and shirt. Trying not to notice how well defined his chest and stomach muscles were. Watching him struggle to make his hands undo his belt — until she took over the task. Trying not to watch as he proceeded to strip out of his jeans and crawl under the covers.

Once he was finally settled, she sat down on the side of the bed and gently stroked his hair. It wasn't long before he fell asleep.

Unsure what to do, she simply continued to sit beside him, watching his chest rise and fall. Looking around the room, she spotted a large chair. She slipped off her shoes and crawled onto the chair.

Even though the danger had passed, her mind wouldn't calm. Terror ate at her belly. What was wrong with him? Was he dying? Is that why he'd run from their kiss? Did he know he only had a

limited time left and didn't think it was fair to get involved with her?

She had assumed the reason he'd run was that he was a time traveler. But what if that wasn't the reason at all? Did he have some horrible disease that he knew would shortly take him from her?

Everything suddenly became so clear to her. If he'd been trying to protect her, he was already too late. She had already fallen head-over-heels in love with him. And losing him was going to kill her now whether or not they ever got involved.

So really ... no matter what was wrong with him, she was not going to let him go. He was hers for whatever time he had left. She'd deal with the consequences to herself after he was gone.

Crawling out of the chair, she walked back over to the bed, her eyes caressing his beloved face.

"I love you, Charlie King," she whispered, kissing his forehead lightly before returning to her chair to watch over him while he slept.

The knocking woke Lois. Disoriented, she looked around, her eyes eventually falling on the man sleeping in the nearby bed. A slow smile began to form on her lips until the circumstances that had led to her spending the night seeped back into her conscious mind.

More knocking pushed those thoughts aside. Realizing someone was knocking on the door and not wanting the intruder to wake Charlie, she rose to her feet, rushing over to the door and opening it.

"Molly?" she asked, quickly stepping outside and closing the door behind her.

"Oh, thank god. When I couldn't get hold of you last night ... and then again this morning, I was worried that ... Well, considering what happened to you ... I was just worried that whoever slipped that drug into your drink might have decided to finish the job. I was hoping Charlie might know where you were." She suddenly smiled. "Turns out I was right."

"Molly, it isn't what it looks like."

"It looks like you spent the night together."

"Well, we did, but not like that," she quickly added when Molly instantly grinned. "He ... " She hesitated, suddenly unwilling to share Charlie's secrets, even with her best friend. "It's a long story."

"Uh, huh," Molly said, obviously not accepting the flimsy explanation.

"So why were you looking for me?" Lois asked, attempting to change the subject.

"Well, last night I was just calling to see if you wanted to go out and celebrate your first story in the Daily Planet," she said, before glancing at the door behind Lois. "But it seems you found someone else to celebrate with."

"How did you know that I got my story published in ... Oh, right. I told you when I called you to get a quote for the story."

Molly nodded. "Never been an anonymous source before. It was sort of cool. Anyway, the reason I was trying to contact you this morning is because I got a call from someone looking for you."

"Who?"

"She wouldn't leave a name. But she said she needed to talk to you about your story. When she couldn't reach you at the dorm, someone suggested she try the sorority house."

That got Lois' attention. This woman really did seem determined to reach her. "Did she say why?"

Molly shook her head. "Anyway, I told her to come over to the house this afternoon. Since you weren't in your room at the dorm, I took a look at your schedule and ran by your first class, hoping to catch you. When you weren't there ..."

"Class! Molly, what time is it?" Lois looked down at her

watch, staring in disbelief at the time.

Molly laughed. "Guess you forgot, huh?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"That will happen when you are up half the night ... not doing what it looks like you were doing."

"Molly, I told you ..."

"Nothing happened," Molly completed. "Okay, okay. But I can't say I understand why not. He's a great guy, Lois."

Lois glanced back at the door to the room. "He really is, isn't he." Even she heard the wistful longing in her voice.

Molly laughed. "You got it bad, girl."

"Yeah. I sort of do."

"Okay, well I've got a class of my own to get to. So I'll see you later. The girl who called said she'd be by at one, so ..."

"I'll be there."

"Oh, one other thing. I picked up a dozen copies of the Daily Planet this morning. They're in my room if you want to take a look." She winked at Lois. "Pretty impressive story on the front page that might interest you."

"Yes! Absolutely."

"Okay, I'll see you later."

Lois watched as Molly turned to leave. Once her friend was part way down the street, Lois glanced back at her watch. If she hurried, had a quick shower, she could make it to her second class. Then she glanced back at the door to the room and changed her mind. She and Charlie needed to talk. Today Lois was going to do what everyone else seemed to do on a regular basis. She was going to play hooky.

Clark woke to the sound of someone entering the room. He moaned in response to the aroma that hit his nostrils almost immediately.

"Freshly baked croissants," he said without even bothering to open his eyes.

"Hey, look who's finally awake."

Clark smiled. He knew that voice. Opening his eyes when he felt the bed next to him depress, he looked up to see the most beautiful woman he'd ever known sitting next to him. She'd obviously been up for a while. Her freshly washed hair was still wet — although she smelled like his shampoo rather than her normal floral scent.

"Did I really just spend the night with the most beautiful woman in the world?" he asked, smiling up at her.

Her laughter was like music to his ears. "No. Sorry to disappoint you. It was just me here."

"Then I was right the first time."

She ducked her head and pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. He couldn't help but smile. He wondered if she had any idea how completely adorable she was when she did that.

Suddenly, her expression changed, almost scaring him in its sudden intensity. "How long do you have, Charlie?"

"Huh?" he asked, completely baffled with this sudden change of subject.

"You're dying, aren't you?"

"Dying?" he asked, his mind a swirl of confusion. He pushed himself into a seated position. He couldn't help but notice when her eyes flicked to his bare chest. He could hear the involuntary increase in her heart rate and see a blush rise in her cheeks, and couldn't help but smile in response.

"Well, after what happened last night, I thought ..."

"Lois, I'm not dying. I told you, it was just a headache. Okay, a very bad headache," he added when she looked as if she was about to object. "But just a headache, none the less."

"How long have you been having these headaches?"

"Not long."

"Have you seen a doctor about them?"

He suddenly felt very uncomfortable. "Listen, Lois, I don't

want to get into the reasons, but I can't see a doctor."

"Is this about insurance? Because I'm sure I could get my father to see you for free if you ..."

"It's not about insurance," he said, reaching out and taking her hand. "Lois, relax," he said, keeping eye contact with her. "It was just a headache."

"But ..."

His free hand came up and he lay his fingers over her lips. "I'm fine. Now ... was that croissants I smelled a minute ago?"

She looked at him for a moment more before she finally seemed to let the subject go. "Uhh ... yeah, I just ... well, I thought you might be hungry when you woke up. I certainly am. I didn't know what you might like so I got an assortment. And coffee. I hope you like coffee in the mornings."

"Coffee is always the right choice."

"Okay, then why don't you get up while I lay things out."

She moved over to a table on the far side of the room, having to step around the large tarp covered contraption sitting in the middle of the floor. He felt slightly confused, but at the same time grateful that she almost seemed oblivious to its presence. Maybe there was enough on her mind at the moment without worrying about what was under the tarp. On the other hand, it was rather strange, given who she was, that she wasn't more curious about it.

"Given how late you slept, we've sort of got to get moving here. We've got a source to meet with at one."

"You had time to get breakfast and a source all before I woke up? Don't suppose you managed to snag a copy of this morning's paper while you were out."

Her smile was almost dazzling when she held up the Daily Planet, her article prominently displayed on the top right hand side of the front page.

"Congratulations. Your first front page story."

"Thanks," she said, now looking somewhat embarrassed. "So why don't you ..."

She gestured towards the bathroom before seeming to deliberately turn her back to him once again. When he suddenly realized just how little he was wearing, he understood. Quickly, he grabbed some clothes and ducked into the bathroom.

A headache. Could that really have been just a headache? She supposed so. After all, weren't migraine headaches supposed to be pretty incapacitating? And she had to admit, she'd never seen anyone get a migraine, so maybe ... Besides, he wouldn't lie to her about something this important, would he? Either way, she supposed she would have to take his word for it — at least until she had evidence to the contrary.

She let out a breath. He was okay. He wasn't dying. She closed her eyes for a moment and let that information sink in, allowing the tension to drain from her body. Anything else they could work through.

They still had to discuss why he'd run away from her last night. But there wasn't time for that now — given how late he'd actually managed to sleep. But until they did, there was no way she planned to let him out of her sight. There was no way she was going to let him get into that time machine and simply disappear on her until they had thrashed the whole thing out.

He might not know it yet, but Lois Lane had a bone in her teeth and she wasn't about to let go until he came clean with her ... about everything.

She heard the water stop and hurried to complete breakfast preparations. He would be out of the shower soon. Drying off that gorgeous body. Slipping into his briefs and jeans. Pulling a shirt over those impressive shoulders. She shook her head in amusement when it occurred to her just how excited she could get just imagining what he looked like doing all those things.

Molly was right. She had it bad.

"Mayson Drake," the blonde said, offering Lois her hand.

"Lois Lane," Lois responded.

"Who's he?"

Lois glanced over at Charlie. "He's a friend. Charlie King." Mayson couldn't seem to look directly at Charlie. Instead, she looked decidedly uncomfortable about his presence.

"Uhh ... Charlie, would you mind going to see what's keeping Molly? I really could use that cup of coffee."

Charlie seemed to pick up on her hint immediately. "Sure. Nice to meet you, Ms. Drake," he said before leaving the room.

"I'm sorry about that," Mayson said the instant he was gone.

"I have a bit of a problem with men I don't know." She shrugged.

"No problem," Lois said. "Look, why don't we go into the study? We can have some privacy there to talk."

Mayson nodded.

After they took a seat in the study, Mayson began silently studying her fingernails. Not knowing why Mayson had wanted to see her, Lois felt a little lost about where to start. From Mayson's reaction to Charlie, she suspected that something very bad had happened to this woman. But since she didn't know that for certain, she didn't want to jump to conclusions. Well, this was really Mayson's show so Lois decided to wait, see if Mayson would talk if she just gave her time.

"I read your story," Mayson finally said.

Lois nodded. Molly had already mentioned that.

Mayson looked around the room, taking in all the books lining the walls. "I went to New Troy University last year, you know. Seems like a lifetime ago."

"What were you studying?" Lois asked, because it seemed a neutral enough question — but one that would tell Mayson she was listening.

"I was in my first year of law school." Mayson gave a humorless laugh. "I wanted to be Perry Mason. My hero. I figured it was my destiny ... given his name and mine — and the fact that Perry Mason's chief investigator was named Drake. Couldn't be a coincidence, right? I was going to defend all the wrongfully accused. Be the greatest criminal defense attorney who ever practiced law. Talk about irony."

Molly chose that moment to enter, bearing coffee.

"Do you two want to talk alone?" Molly asked, as she poured the coffee and handed it out.

Lois looked over at Mayson who merely shrugged so Lois gestured for Molly to join them. Molly took a seat and all three women sipped their coffee for a moment before Mayson continued.

"Anyway, after reading your story ... I'm sorry. I'm kinda having a hard time with this."

"It's okay. Take your time," Lois responded, wishing she could pull out her tape recorder but knowing it would spook Mayson. At least with Molly here, she had another pair of ears. It briefly occurred to her to wonder if, given how good Charlie's hearing was, he could hear them from the front room or kitchen or wherever he was currently waiting.

"Last year ... One night last year ... It was February sometime. A bunch of girlfriends and I decided to go to a party at the Beta Beta house."

Molly and Lois shared a look.

"We were having a good time. Drinking a bit, I suppose. But not overdoing it. Meeting new people. That sort of thing. Anyway, we sort of got separated. You know how it is. Someone spotted a friend she knew and wanted to talk to him. Another wanted to dance." Mayson shrugged.

"Anyway, I wasn't sure what happened. I figured I'd just had too much to drink because the next morning I woke up in my room with no memory of how I got home. Funny thing was, I only remembered having a couple of drinks over ... probably a couple of hours. I don't even remember feeling particularly tipsy.

Until ... Well, all of a sudden I felt drunk. I don't remember anything after that.

"At first, I didn't know anything had happened. Oh, I knew a few things were sort of strange. I mean, I found my shoes in a different spot than where I normally kept them. And I wasn't wearing a top. I always sleep in an old sweatshirt. But I just figured I must have had more to drink than I remembered and maybe passed out before getting fully changed."

She hesitated for a long moment, studying the dark liquid in her cup.

"But there were other things, too."

When she didn't continue, Lois finally spoke. "Like what?"

"Bruises on the insides of my legs. One of them actually looked like a hand mark. I didn't notice them until I was showering." Her voice cracked slightly.

"Did you see a doctor?" Molly asked, when Mayson didn't seem able to continue.

The question seemed to bring Mayson back to her surroundings. She blinked, apparently trying to focus on the question. "Uhh ... yeah. Not until the next day, though. I wanted to get the morning after pill. You know, just in case. I figured I must have gotten drunk and ..." She brushed at the tears that had formed in her eyes. "The whole thing made me a little uncomfortable, not knowing who I had been with or exactly what had happened. But I was too ashamed to mention it to anyone. I figured it was my fault. That I'd had too much to drink and then done something incredibly stupid.

"I was never exactly a prude about these things, but ... To be pretty sure you had sex with someone and have absolutely no idea who ..."

She fell silent once again.

For a moment, Lois thought that was all she would say, but breaking the silence suddenly, Mayson continued.

"A few days later, the nightmares started."

"What sort of nightmares?"

"They were always the same. Feelings mostly. Never solid images. But I would have this overwhelming feeling that I was trapped. I would be begging ... Not sure what for, although in the dreams I did. And trying to push my way free. Always trying to push my way free" Her voice trailed off, as if lost in the nightmare. Then, she seemed to shake it off. "I would wake up screaming, tears running down my cheeks, often with my roommate shaking me awake.

"After that, I became increasingly paranoid. I wasn't sleeping well and my marks took a nose-dive. I couldn't stand to be alone with a man — not even some of my closest friends if they were male ... And if someone touched me ... reached out and touched my shoulder ... brushed past me" She shook her head, as if still trying to come to terms with that aspect of what had happened to her. "Finally, I dropped out of school.

"So when I read your story ... I don't know. Maybe I did just drink too much, but ..."

"Your story sounds a lot like what happened to me," Lois said softly. "I had one glass of wine and after that ... I really couldn't tell you what happened then."

"You're the one in the story?" Mayson asked.

Lois nodded. "That's not for public consumption, but ... well, I sort of figured you needed to know."

"Do you think you were" Mayson didn't say the word, but that didn't keep Lois from knowing exactly what she meant.

"No. I got really lucky. Charlie — the guy you met when you first arrived — ran into me just as I was leaving the party with a couple of guys and he stopped them. Then he got Molly and they took me home. But my story could have so easily been just like yours."

Mayson nodded. "I don't suppose there is any way to know for sure if that's what happened to me, but I thought" She

shrugged, as if not entirely certain what she thought.

"Maybe not. But ... you mentioned a party at Beta Beta. There were a lot of Beta Beta guys here the other night. Maybe ... " She glanced over at Molly.

"I could probably get a copy of Beta Beta's membership list," Molly said. "Say I need it because ... of an idea I have for our next joint party or something."

Lois nodded. "Then maybe we could compare it to our list of suspects."

"I'll get right on that," Molly said, rising to her feet.

"Do you remember anything else about this guy?" Lois asked. "Even if it's just from your dreams."

Mayson shook her head. "That's what so insidious about what happened. It could have been anyone. Every time I'd see someone I was like ... Is that him? All a guy would have to do was smile at me or look at me funny and I'd have a full-blown panic attack. It's like ... you've been invaded and everyone you see could be the suspect."

Lois nodded. Although she couldn't exactly identify, she could imagine well enough what that might be like.

"So do you think you'll be coming back to school?" Lois asked, needing to know that this young woman was going to be okay.

"Not here. But I have been accepted in law school out in California starting next semester. I have a sister living there, so I'll be staying with her."

"Good."

"And ... I managed to get into some good counseling. One thing I can tell you though, I no longer want to be a defense lawyer."

Lois couldn't help but smile at that. "No criminal law for you, hey?"

"Oh, I didn't say that. In fact, I now want to work for the District Attorney's office. Maybe after I graduate, I'll be able to return to Metropolis and get a job here."

"Me investigating; you prosecuting ... The criminals of Metropolis won't know what hit them," Lois responded, finally provoking a smile out of the other woman.

"Okay, so let's assume that Mayson's experience last year is connected with what happened to both Angelina Wesley and me," Lois said after Mayson left and Lois filled Clark in on what she had told them.

Not that he had really needed her to. He'd been unable to resist listening to most of it. The pain in Mayson Drake's voice had been too intense not to be drawn in by her story.

"Can we really know that they're connected?" Molly asked, placing a plate of cookies on the coffee table before taking a seat. "I mean, unlike with you and Angelina, we have no evidence that Mayson was actually drugged."

"I think so. Two Beta Beta parties." When Molly raised her eyebrows, Lois corrected herself. "Okay, so last Friday's party was at Alpha Nu Rho. But all the Beta Beta guys were invited. Besides, when she was talking ... I really think she was drugged just like I was."

"I say we go with that for now," Clark said, helping himself to a cookie. "We can always revise our theory later if we need to."

"So ... what does that tell us?" Molly asked, not seeing the point. "I mean, even when they fax me that list of Beta Beta guys and we compare it to our suspects, that doesn't really tell us much. After all, you saw how it was last Friday. There are almost always more gate crashers than regular Beta Beta or Alpha Nu Rho members who show up to these things."

"It tells us," Lois continued, "that whoever is responsible is not a freshman. Otherwise, this year would be the first year something like this would have happened."

Both Clark and Molly shared a look, impressed by Lois' deductive reasoning.

"Okay," Clark said, "so ... let's start by crossing off the freshmen."

They took a look at their suspect list, together with what they had been able to put together about each of them over the course of the past week.

"Him," Molly said, pointing to the name of one of the football players.

"And him," added Clark, pointing to the name of one of the others.

"And Teddy," Lois said, pointing to the name of her buddy from gymnastics class. "Oh, and Joe ... " Lois added, giving Clark a look that told him just how stupid she thought he was for insisting that Joe's name be put on the list in the first place.

They stared at the list for a moment more.

"And Russell," Lois finally said.

"Russell?" asked Molly. "Linda's brother. Why are you crossing his name off the list?"

"Because Linda is a freshman. Russell doesn't even go to school here. So why would he have been at a party on the NTU campus last year when Linda wasn't even attending?"

When Molly and Clark still looked skeptical, Lois let out a breath.

"Besides, he was attending MIT last year."

"Massachusetts Institute of Technology?" Clark asked. When Lois nodded, Clark immediately crossed Russell off the list.

"I'm still not sure we should cross Russell off the list," Molly said. "He was the one who distracted you and got you to leave your drink alone on the table. I mean, isn't it possible he was back here, visiting his family for the weekend — Linda is from Metropolis, after all. Maybe he happened to know someone who was going to the party at the Beta Beta house and tagged along or something?"

Lois nodded thoughtfully. "You might be right. Maybe we can get that information out of Linda. Find out if he was back here in February."

"Without letting her know why we're asking?" Molly said.

"Of course," Lois responded, a smile appearing on her face that told the other two that she had an idea about how to get that information and was sort of relishing the idea of getting one over on Linda.

"Okay, so who does that leave?" Lois asked and all of them looked again at the still incredibly long list.

"Excuse me," Tracy, one of the other sorority sisters, said, sticking her head in the study. "There's someone here to see Lois."

When Lois left the room, Molly looked over at Clark.

"Charlie," she said softly, causing him to look up from where he was studying the list. "I don't think I've thanked you for what you did for Lois that night. Now that I know more of the story ... I'm just glad you came along when you did. If it had been someone else ... "

"There's no need to thank me, Molly. I'm glad I came along when I did, too. I care about Lois ... a lot."

Molly smiled. "I'm glad. She cares about you, too. Maybe more than she lets on."

Clark quickly looked back at the list of suspects, his conscience screaming at him mercilessly. He shouldn't be here. Even Molly could tell that Lois was falling for him. It wasn't fair to let that happen. He should leave now. Take the time machine and fly out to a deserted island where he could ...

"Excuse me," Lois said, cutting into Clark's rambling thoughts before he could put them into action.

Both he and Molly looked over to where she was standing at the door, a young woman wearing too much make-up and too little clothing standing next to her.

Clark recognized her immediately. Even though she'd only been at the Planet for a few years before being lured away by one of those Hollywood gossip television shows and even though she'd left before he'd joined the staff, it would be hard not to recognize one of the best, not to mention most flamboyant, gossip columnists the Planet had ever had. They still talked about her on a pretty regular basis — although not always for the quality of her gossip.

"This is Cat Grant," Lois said. "She used to date Donny Landover. Anyway, she says she might have some information for us."

"Well, that might be ... overstating things a bit," Cat said. "But when I read your article this morning ..."

"You read the Daily Planet?" Molly asked, stunned.

"I can read, you know," Cat responded indignantly.

"We know you can," Lois said, shooting Molly a look that told her not to antagonize this potential source.

"I actually want to work for the Daily Planet some day."

"Doing what?" Clark asked carefully, trying not to seem as if he knew that some day she would.

"Gossip columnist." To what she seemed to think were their skeptical looks, she continued. "Hey, I'd be great at it! I always get the best stuff." She let out a breath, seeming to get control of her temper again in the light of their shocked expressions. "Sorry, I guess that was uncalled for." She shrugged. "I guess I should get use to that. Most people don't think too much of gossip columnists. But that's just because they've never seen it done right before," she added, giving Clark a wink.

"No problem," Clark said. "So what brought you by today?"

"Gossip, I guess," she said, giving them a sheepish smile.

"What did you hear?" Lois asked, gesturing her to take a seat.

Cat sat down, preening slightly as she looked at Clark. Clark couldn't help but be amused: the come-hither look in her eyes, the sensuality of her movements, each carefully crafted and calculated to attract the male of the species ... Oh, yeah. That was the Cat Grant he'd heard about.

"Well, it may be nothing," Cat said, finally turning her attention to Lois. "I wouldn't have bothered coming at all, except after reading your story ... I guess whether my information is useful depends on whether the woman who didn't want to be identified in your story is actually you." She looked at Lois expectantly.

Lois sank down onto the sofa, stunned. How had this woman figured it out? And if she knew ...

"Don't worry. I don't think anyone else would have made the connection," Cat said. "But like I said, I get the best gossip, partly because I tend to be very good at connecting the dots between random pieces of information."

"So what exactly did you hear?" Clark asked, trying to keep them on track without forcing Lois to confirm Cat's suspicions.

"Okay. The story making its rounds among the jocks is that a couple of football players almost got Lois to leave the party with them last Friday." She looked at Lois. "They were apparently talking about how drunk you were."

"Drunk?" Lois asked. "They didn't say anything about drugs?"

Cat shook her head. "Given some of their comments, I got the impression that they had just taken advantage of the situation — not that they had engineered it."

"What type of comments?" Molly asked.

"Well, one of them made a comment about how they couldn't believe you'd put yourself in that position — given the fact that you knew how many people were mad at you. Anyway, I'd have thought nothing more about it except that when I read your article, I suddenly wondered if what they mistook for drunkenness was you actually being drugged."

Lois chewed on that for a moment. "So then, the person who

drugged me might not have been connected to the two guys seen trying to get me to leave the party with them."

Clark was slightly surprised that she had admitted this in front of Cat.

"Did they say anything else?" Lois asked. "Did they say what their plan was?"

"I got the feeling that they thought it might be the chance to teach you a little lesson," Cat said. "I'm not even certain they were talking about sex. It was more like ... they intended to humiliate you somehow — although I can't completely rule out the sex option. I'm not sure they'd even really thought it through — really knew what their plan was. But they said someone came along and they decided to scram. And since then ... Well, apparently Donny has made it clear that everyone is to leave you alone."

"Can you give us names?" Clark asked.

Cat nodded. "Yeah. Bruce Alcock and Dick Johnson."

"Two of the football players I reported for not writing their own exams," Lois said.

Again, Cat nodded. "They said something about coming with Donny and then staying around after he left."

"They must have been the two guys with no necks who came with Landover."

"That sounds like them," Cat said.

"Can you tell us anything else?"

"Maybe. It wasn't anything they actually said, but I got the impression that someone else may have pointed out to them how drunk you were. Maybe ... suggested this was there chance for a little pay-back."

Lois leaned forward in her seat. "Any idea who?"

Cat shook her head. "I wouldn't even say that part of the story rises to the level of real gossip. It was just a feeling I got, but I couldn't tell you why." She shrugged. "Sometimes I just get these feelings about things — you know, where your gut is telling you something but you can't quite put your finger on why."

Lois nodded, knowing that sensation quite well.

"Well, anyway, that's all I know. If I hear anything else, I'll be in touch. I hope you get this guy. Last thing we need around here is some creep drugging women and dragging them back to his lair."

"Don't approve of that kind of cave man behavior?" Molly asked.

"Absolutely not! If anyone is going to do the drugging and dragging, I want it to be me." She winked at Clark and rose to her feet.

Clark couldn't help smile in amusement. Yes, definitely the Cat Grant he'd heard about.

"Cat, before you go ... Can you tell me if you've ever heard of a drug called GHB?" Lois asked.

"Sure. Some of the guys use it instead of steroids. Why? Is that the drug someone is putting in women's drinks?"

"That's not for public consumption," Lois said immediately.

"No, of course not," Cat said. "Do you really think I'd jeopardize my chance of a job at the Planet by betraying its newest rising star?"

"Rising star?" Lois asked.

Cat just winked.

Clark's eyebrows went up, suddenly wondering exactly what sources of information this woman did have.

"Like I said," Cat said, reaching over to snag a cookie. "I'm the best."

"Do you know who might be using GHB?" Clark asked.

"Not off the top of my head, but I can do some sniffing around if you like."

"That would be great," Lois said.

"Any idea who their supplier might be?" Clark asked.

"Someone they refer to as Einstein," Cat responded.

"Any idea who he is?"

"No. And on that one you're on your own. I might be able to find out who is using GHB, but if I start asking about suppliers ... That's the sort of information that makes the phrase, 'curiosity killed the cat' more than just some idle expression."

"Well, that was interesting," Clark said when Cat finally padded out of the house.

"How certain are we that she can be believed?" Molly asked. "I mean, she is friends with the football players."

"I believe her," Lois said. "She gave me honest information about the cheerleaders writing the football player's exams. So it's not as if she is going out of her way to try to protect them."

"I suppose, but ..."

Molly's comment was cut off when the phone rang. Molly grabbed it, said hello and then listened for a moment before saying, "I'll tell her," and hanging up.

"What's up?" Lois asked.

"That was Linda."

"Oh, great. What did she want?"

"Apparently, you have to get down to the Ink and Quill now. She didn't say why."

Lois was pleased that Charlie had insisted on accompanying her to the Ink and Quill. For reasons she couldn't quite put her finger on, she had a bad feeling about this. So to have her guardian angel there was comforting. Besides, any time she could spend with Charlie was a gift.

"There you are," Linda said the instant they walked through the front doors.

"What's going on?" Lois asked.

"Paul wants to talk to you."

Lois glanced towards Paul's office. "What about?"

"You'll have to ask him. Hi, Charlie," Linda added, her sudden interest obvious from her tone of voice.

But this time for some reason, instead of Linda's flirting hurting her, Lois found herself rolling her eyes. Could this woman get any more obvious? Not that it wasn't annoying, of course. But if Cat Grant hadn't been able to get his attention — and although he'd looked amused by her antics sometimes, he'd never appeared the least bit interested — then Linda didn't stand a chance.

"Listen, Linda, I've been meaning to ask you something," Lois said.

"What?"

"Well, I was talking to one of the Beta Beta guys who came over to help clean up after the party last Friday and ... Well, he saw me talking to Russell and wondered how to get in touch with him. I told him I'd ask you."

"How does he know Russell?"

Lois shrugged. "He said something about meeting him at a party at the Beta Beta house last February." As she spoke, she began walking towards her desk, as if not particularly interested in getting a response.

"He must be mistaken," Linda said. "Russell didn't even come home from MIT for Christmas last year."

Lois quickly glanced over at Charlie who was definitely looking amused. Before she could burst out laughing at how easy that had been, she directed her attention to some papers on her desk, sorting through them as if they held all the answers to the universe.

"Anyway, if this guy does know Russell," Linda said. "Have him give me a call."

"Whatever," Lois said. "I probably won't even see him again."

"Then why ask me about him?"

Lois shrugged. "So you don't have any idea why Paul

demanded I come right over?"

"You'll have to ask him."

Lois turned and looked at Paul's office door. It was closed and she could see that he was inside, talking to someone. She glanced over at Charlie. "While we wait, want to grab a cup of coffee?" she asked. "Usually tastes like slush but ..."

"I like newsroom coffee, Lois," Charlie said.

For a moment, she stared at him, wondering what he meant by that. He seemed to shift slightly under her consideration. Then she let it go. Probably all connected with everything else. And she planned on getting to 'everything else' soon enough.

"Well, come on," she said, grabbing Charlie's arm to lead him towards the coffee room. "Later," she said to Linda as they departed.

Stepping into the coffee room, Lois realized it wasn't empty. "Great," she muttered under her breath when she realized who was there. "Bob," she said, her voice flat.

"Lois," he responded using the same tone as her.

Avoiding further conversation, she stepped up to the coffee machine and began pouring cups for both herself and Charlie.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Bob snag a couple of coffee filters and stick them in his jacket pocket.

She couldn't help herself. She just couldn't. "Still too cheap to buy your own coffee filters, I see."

"Who are you? The filter police?" Bob responded before turning and marching across the room.

"Lane!"

The sound of Paul yelling her name redirected Lois' attention almost immediately. "Be back in a minute," Lois said to Charlie before handing him both cups of coffee and high tailing it towards Paul's office.

Clark was lost in thought, his eyes focused on Bob, as Lois rushed across the newsroom floor. He knew that man from somewhere. But where? Bob. The name didn't quite fit but ...

Suddenly, his eyes widened. Bob was short for Robert. Robert Stafford! Of course. In his time, Robert Stafford was the Governor of New Troy's science adviser. The one leading the attack on Superman. How was it he had not made the connection until now?

Then his mind flicked back to the exchange in the coffee room between Lois and Bob. Apparently, Bob was a coffee filter thief. And by the sounds of things, this wasn't the first time. Strange. Very, very strange.

"Why do you care? You didn't even want the story!"

Lois' angry voice cut through his thoughts and he looked over at the closed door to the editor's office.

"You still work for the Ink and Quill," Paul yelled back. "That means you don't go shopping stories to other papers! Whether I want to publish it or not is irrelevant! Maybe I just wanted you to get more proof before printing it!"

"As if! You called it gossip and, if I recall correctly, threw it in the garbage can and assigned me some fluff piece about a stupid art exhibit! You even told me to give up on the story! I thought it was an important story, one that women at NTU should be aware of, so I went to the Daily Planet!"

"You had no right to undermine my decision like that!"

"Undermine? Just because you were proven wrong does not mean I undermined you! You undermined yourself!"

Clark found himself walking towards Paul's office, noting as he did so that the newsroom had gone silent and everyone's eyes were now looking in the same direction. It seemed super hearing was not necessary to hear the fight going on behind that closed door.

"You think just because the Daily Planet chose to print that garbage, it undermines me? Who did you sleep with over there to get them to print your story? I hear they have some sort of

Lothario working as a copy boy. Ralph ... something? Is he the one you screwed to get your story published?"

Clark opened the door and rushed into the office just in time to grab Lois in mid-air as she threw herself towards Paul.

"You're lucky he stopped you," Paul said. "Or you'd have been looking at a visit to the police station on charges of assault. Now that would make good copy."

"Why you little ..."

"Lois!" Clark said, finally getting the attention of the hissing and spitting wildcat in his arms.

"That's it, isn't it," Paul continued. "You slept with someone at the Daily Planet to get your story published. I would have thought Perry White was above that sort of thing. But to get garbage like that published, he must be the one you ..."

Keeping himself between Lois and Paul, Clark spun around to face Paul. "Okay, that's enough!" he said, causing Paul to take an unconscious step back. "You're about two words away from a sexual harassment complaint. And if it comes to that ... I swear. I'll see your name splashed across the front of every newspaper in this country as the first student editor to be the subject of a Title Seven law suit since it was expanded to include educational institutions. You'll be able to kiss your career goodbye."

Clark took a deep breath, trying to get control of his temper. He was relieved to realize that his rant had calmed Lois down because if she decided to attack Paul again, he wasn't entirely sure he would stop her.

"Come on, Charlie," Lois said from behind him. "Let's get out of here. He's not worth the aggravation."

Then, with her head held high, she left, marching through the newsroom to pick up her pack and coat and head for the door. She didn't stop, didn't alter her pace until they were a long way down the hall. When Clark saw her footsteps finally falter, he quickly caught up to her, pulling her into his arms just as the tears started.

Lois had to smile as she stared down at her hot chocolate — Molly's tried and true remedy for a truly awful day. Seems that this one must have been particularly bad since Molly had even seen fit to top it off with marshmallows, whipping cream and chocolate sprinkles.

She glanced at Molly who shrugged sheepishly in response.

"I still can't believe he said that to you," Molly said.

Lois shrugged, using her finger to scoop off a few chocolate flakes to pop them in her mouth. She closed her eyes and just allowed the sweet taste to calm her still trembling nerves. Whoever had invented chocolate should have been given a Nobel Prize. Lois wasn't entirely sure what category. If there was one for keeping women sane, it would be the obvious choice.

"So how will this affect you if Paul decides that, because of this, he won't publish your stories anymore?" Molly asked.

"Don't you have to have a certain number of stories published in the Ink and Quill to pass your year?"

Lois shrugged again. "I don't know. I guess if he starts rejecting my stories because of this, I could go talk to our faculty advisor or something. I just don't know. And I really don't want to think about it right now."

"Okay then," Charlie said. "How about a change of subject? I have a theory about who might have drugged your drink."

Charlie's words got both Lois and Molly's attention fast.

"Who?" Lois asked.

"First," Charlie said, "tell me something ... Bob Stafford ... Does he always take two coffee filters ... you know, when he swipes filters from the Ink and Quill?"

"You think Bob ..."

"Does he?" Charlie asked, interrupting her.

Lois thought about that for a moment before nodding. "Yeah, I always thought it was weird, but why would that make you

think ..."

"Do you remember when I told you about certain extra items someone needs to make GHB?"

"Filters," Lois responded, thinking back to that conversation. "But why would two coffee filters make you think Bob's the one cooking up GHB in some sort of home lab? I mean, why couldn't he just be making coffee?"

"I read somewhere that one coffee filter is not enough if you want to strain the GHB to change it from a liquid into a powder. But two supposedly work great."

"Somehow you managed to leave out that little detail," Lois said.

"Is the number of coffee filters really enough to prove that Bob is the one who drugged her?" Molly asked.

"No, but ..."

"It got you wondering if it could be him," Lois said, as her mind began working to see if he could be right. "Bob was definitely at the party last Friday ..."

"And he's a member of Beta Beta. In fact, if I recall what you told me, he's some high mucky-muck in Beta Beta ..."

Charlie added. "He was definitely mad at you for stealing Linda's thunder. In fact, haven't you two had several run ins since you first met?" Molly asked, obviously getting into the spirit of things now that they were examining the evidence.

"So many that Linda used to bug me about it. She'd say that if you like a guy, continually antagonizing his best friend wasn't good tactics," Lois said. "And on the night of the party, he did make some sexual comment to me. Something about my need to 'get laid.' I wrote it off at the time as just one more clash with Bob because I was more concerned about Joe's warning about the football players."

"Also he's a senior, so he would have been around here last year," Charlie said.

Lois suddenly reached out, grabbing Charlie's arm. "Angelina Wesley!"

"What?" Molly asked.

"What about her?" Charlie added.

"Her roommate told us that she was working towards a science degree, hoping to get into med school next year. Bob is a science major."

"So ...?" Molly asked, not seeing the point.

"She could have met Bob in one of her classes. The roommate said Angelina never went on dates," Lois continued. "And that she didn't seem especially excited about this date either ..."

"... so you're wondering if maybe it wasn't a date at all. That maybe she just used that term with her roommate because it was easier than explaining the real reason she was going out," Charlie said.

"Exactly! Maybe she found out what Bob was up to and planned to meet with him in order to confront him about it ..."

"... and when she did, he drugged her and killed her."

"Did you two practice that?" Molly asked, amused.

"But that's quite a leap," Charlie said.

"Is it? It fits with what we know about Angelina. The comment her roommate made about thinking the date went 'better than expected' always bugged me."

"Do we have a list of what courses Angelina was taking?" Charlie asked. "It might be interesting to see if there could be a connection there."

"Uhh ... yeah." Lois grabbed her backpack and rifled through it until she found a file folder containing their research notes. Settling back down, she opened it up. A moment later, she had what she needed. "Advanced chemistry with Dr. Simons at eleven a.m. Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Of course, they could have been in one of these other classes together, too."

"Now all we need is to find out if Stafford was in any of the same classes," Charlie said.

Both women nodded.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Molly suddenly said, jumping to her feet. "I bet I could get Bob's class list."

"How?" Lois asked.

"Alpha Nu Rho's computer is connected to the university's computer. So ..." She crossed the study, taking a seat at the computer.

Lois and Charlie rose to their feet going to stand behind her, watching silently as Molly applied her magic. It didn't take long before Bob's course list was coming out of the printer.

"Stafford had advanced chemistry with Dr. Simons," Lois said.

"At ten a.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Friday," Charlie said. "Angelina's class was at eleven. And there are no other classes here that match. So they weren't in any classes together."

All three stared in silence at the list for a moment, as if they just knew the answer must be there — and couldn't quite believe it wasn't.

"Okay," Molly finally said. "So that was a bust."

"I don't think we should give up on Bob just yet," Lois said.

"Then ... what else do we know about the person who drugged you?" Molly asked. "Are we assuming the person who drugged you is the person Cat referred to as Einstein?"

"I think that's entirely possible," Charlie said.

"Well, that nickname would certainly fit with what I know about Bob. Trust me, Bob's ego would love the nickname Einstein," Lois said.

"Well, Einstein is the type of nickname you might give a science nerd," Molly conceded.

"Not just a science nerd," Lois corrected. "One who is taking a double major: physics and chemistry."

"The chemistry major making it entirely possible he would know how to make GHB," Charlie said.

"And the physics major giving him something in common with Einstein," Molly completed.

"Exactly! Well, except ... the football players on my list ... you know, the ones not writing their own exams, might well consider someone Einstein who is just slightly more intelligent than your average slug."

Molly and Charlie chuckled.

Suddenly, Lois was struck by another thought. "Oh my god," she gasped.

"What?" Molly exclaimed, followed almost immediately by Charlie

"Do you think Paul knows about this?" She looked at Molly and Charlie as this new idea took hold. "Bob is Paul's best friend. Now, I'm not saying Paul was actually involved in all of this, but ... he sure was quick to quash a story that Perry White thought was good enough to put on the front page of the Daily Planet! What if the reason he quashed the story and the reason he was so furious with me today is that he was trying to protect Bob?"

Charlie and Molly stared at her in stunned silence. Charlie was the one who seemed to recover first.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. First things first ..."

"Finding the evidence against Bob," Lois said.

"If it exists," Charlie cautioned.

"It has to exist," Lois said. "It all makes sense now. I couldn't figure out why Paul would quash my story. But if Bob was involved ... I can't believe I didn't twig onto Bob the instant Paul killed my story."

"Is this Cat Grant?" Molly asked into the phone.

"Sure is. Who's this?"

"Molly Flynn. We met earlier today."

"Hi, Molly. What's up?"

"Any way of finding out who might have suggested to the football players that Lois was drunk ... and that they might want to take advantage of it?"

"I'll see what I can do," Cat promised.

Molly hung up the phone and looked up at the clock. She only hoped Lois and Charlie were careful. After all, she'd had the easy job.

Charlie wasn't waiting patiently. His foot tapped. He paced. He muttered comments under his breath about how quickly Christmas was coming.

It should have annoyed Lois. But for some reason, she found it amusing. 'You really have got it bad, girl,' she told herself for the millionth time in the past hour. Pushing her distracting thoughts aside, she continued to work on the door to Bob's room in the Beta Beta house.

Molly had given them the reason to be here — to pick up the Beta Beta membership list that she had requested. Slipping upstairs unnoticed after that had been easy enough — as was finding Bob's room since the boys had been considerate enough to put name plates on each of the doors. Now all they needed was to get into the room.

Ping.

"Finally," Charlie breathed as she pushed open the door to Bob's room. "If I had known it was going to take that long, I would have sold tickets."

Lois chuckled as she stepped inside. Charlie followed, closing the door and taking an extra moment to lock it. She handed him a pair of rubber surgical gloves before slipping on a pair of her own. "You take the bathroom. I'll check around out here," she said. Giving his backside a playful slap, she sent him in the appropriate direction. In the corner of her eye, she noticed Charlie's curious look, but ignored it. There would be plenty of time for ... whatever ... later. For right now, they had a room to search.

"What a slob," she said, as she took her first good look at the place. Dirty clothes, empty take out cartons, a half finished pizza, an over-flowing ashtray, dirty dishes ... It had it all. Pushing her way through the mess, she wondered how she was expected to find anything in all this.

She stopped in the middle of the room, and made a slow circle.

"Funny. For a guy swiping coffee filters, you'd sort of expect him to have a coffee machine," she noted absently while trying to determine where to begin her search in this pigpen.

She finally decided on the desk. Since there didn't appear to be anything that would qualify as a place to make GHB in the room, maybe her best bet was to see if he had any notes on it. Instructions. A list of clients. Plans to take over the world. Wild discourses on the fallen nature of women. Something ... anything on paper that they could use.

Quickly sorting through a number of papers, she found a half-written story for the Ink and Quill, a half finished essay, some class notes and a letter from some girl in Florida named Peggy. She stopped when she came across a copy of his course list. She'd already seen this. She was about to set it down when an attached document caught her eye. She took a moment to look at it before quickly stuffing the document in her pocket.

"Charlie, if Angelina was killed at the beginning of September ... how many of her classes would she actually have attended?"

"Probably no more than one or two ... Why?"

"Then we've been looking in the wrong place."

Charlie stuck his head out of the bathroom. "What?"

"I just mean ... we should be looking at courses they might have had together last year. Or ..."

"What?"

She didn't answer him, instead her attention was taken up by the DayTimer sitting on Bob's desk. In the corner of her eye, she noticed that Charlie had disappeared back into the bathroom.

Picking up the DayTimer, she began flipping through it when an idea suddenly struck. "Charlie, when did Angelina Wesley die?"

"Uhh ... September 5th."

She quickly opened the book to the appropriate date as Charlie stuck his head back out of the bathroom.

"Find anything," he asked.

She looked up at him and grinned. "Not exactly, but ... Can you think of any reason Bob might have torn 'September 5th out of his DayTimer?"

Charlie's eyebrows rose.

She redirected her attention to the DayTimer once again before ... "Charlie, guess what?"

"What?"

"According to this, Bob was here for summer school."

"Interesting coincidence. Didn't Angelina's roommate tell us that she was here for summer school?"

"We need his course list for ... " her voice trailed off when she found a scribbled note on a page of his DayTimer in May listing the courses he took the previous summer. "Charlie, I think we might be on to something here. He took Advanced Physics in the spring session and Environmental Chemistry during July and August of this past summer. If Angelina took one of those classes ... "

Charlie thought about that for a moment. "That would be our link. But I don't think we found out what she took at summer school."

"What about you? You having any luck?" she asked.

"Well, no lab. If he's making GHB on a regular basis, he's not doing it here. But I did find ... " He held up a packet of small strips. "PH papers," he explained to Lois' confused look.

"Right. You mentioned needing PH papers to make GHB." She put the DayTimer down and looked around again.

"Try under the mattress," Charlie suggested as he headed back into the bathroom to leave the PH papers where he had found them.

"Ooo ... good idea," Lois said, squatting down next to the bed to run her hand between the box spring and mattress. "Charlie, there's something ... " Her voice trailed off and her head snapped up when she heard movement outside the door. Quickly, she pulled out a baggy hidden beneath the mattress. She reached into it and withdrew a small packet of powder before stuffing the remainder of the bag back where she found it. "Charlie ... " she hissed.

He was there almost immediately, grabbing her and heading for the window. She didn't resist. After all, he could fly so ...

He opened the window, picking her up and setting her on the fire escape outside before climbing through himself and then pulling the window until it was almost closed behind him.

She didn't stop to worry about the fact that they weren't flying. Instead, she adjusted immediately, scampering down the fire escape until both she and Charlie were standing on solid ground.

"I managed to find something else when we were in Bob's room," she said when she caught her breath. "I just didn't have time to tell you about it before we were interrupted."

"What?"

"He has a baggy containing various pills, packets of powder and even what appeared to be sugar cubes hidden beneath his mattress. Funny. With the stolen coffee filters and sugar cubes hidden beneath his mattress, I'd almost think coffee was illegal."

"Sugar cubes," Charlie said thoughtfully.

She shook her head, not understanding what he found so fascinating about sugar cubes.

"Is it possible GHB is not the only thing he's cooking up?"

Charlie asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Lois, LSD is often sold in sugar cubes."

Lois' eyebrows rose. "I also managed to grab this." She removed the small packet of powder from her pocket and held it out to him. "Given our talk about using coffee filters to change GHB from a liquid to a powder, I thought ... " She shrugged.

He took the packet from her and looked at it before carefully opening it. He stuck his finger in, getting a small amount on his finger before sticking his finger in his mouth.

"Charlie!" Lois exclaimed.

"I'll be fine," Charlie assured her. "Well, it's not cocaine or anything like that. Now, I don't know what GHB tastes like, but this does taste salty."

"So then ... "

"Still ... He didn't have the capacity for a lab in his room."

"So he must be making it somewhere else."

"Assuming he's making it at all."

"Mmm ... " She pulled out the paper she'd snatched from Bob's room and looked at it again. Suddenly, a smile lit up her face.

"Charlie, where would a chemistry major mix chemicals?"

"You think he's doing it in one of the labs at the university? Wouldn't that be kind of dangerous?"

"Who would know what he was mixing?" Lois responded.

"And think about it. When Angelina's roommate saw our list of suspects, she didn't recognize Bob's name. So they weren't friends. Which means it isn't likely that Angelina found whatever made her suspicious in his room."

"So if she did find out he was up to something ... "

"... it would have to be because she discovered it somewhere else. And look ... " She pointed to the paper. "I found this attached to his course list. I never even thought about it before, but ... this says that he has lab space in Boyle Hall. That's the chemistry building."

"So ... "

Lois smiled. "Come on. Looks like we're not done yet."

"Wait!" Charlie said, grabbing Lois' arm when she started to walk off.

She turned and looked at him.

"I have a better idea."

It didn't take Cat long to figure out where Dick and Bruce were hanging out for the evening. All she'd had to do was to follow the breadcrumbs the football players inevitably left behind. Soon she found herself standing outside The Outpost, taking a deep breath. She had to admit, this wasn't the most relaxing assignment. After all, it wasn't all that long ago that she had broken up with Donny. And even if he wasn't here at the moment, he was likely to make an appearance at some point during the evening.

"Well, here goes nothing," she said silently as she pinched her cheeks, ran her tongue over her teeth and adjusted her top to show a little more cleavage before stepping into the jocks' favorite hang out.

"Hi, boys," Cat purred as she prowled the room.

The 'boys' were suddenly sitting up just a little bit straighter, pulling in their guts a little bit more.

"Come sit here, babe," Frank said, patting his knee.

She gave him a sultry look, but didn't respond, taking a seat instead on the couch next to Bruce. "Hi, Big Boy," she purred, reaching over to make abstract patterns on his upper thigh. "Is there room next to you for little-ol'-me?"

Bruce swallowed hard before nodding.

Cat smiled. Seemed she still had it. After catching Donny in bed with someone else, she had wondered if she still had the power to leave a man speechless. Apparently, she did because

Bruce was still trying to find his voice — stretching his brain in an undoubtedly futile attempt to find something witty to say. Well, whatever his puny brain came up with, she would laugh appropriately. After all, she was positioned perfectly. Now it was only a matter of finding the right opportunity to get her information without making him suspicious. Well, no problem. She had all evening.

It was a good thing that her name hadn't made it into the story Lois Lane had written ... Or was it Linda King. She was still a little unsure how that whole thing had gone down. Still, if her name had appeared, she wouldn't have the chance to get this information now. She would have to remember that in the future.

Lois wasn't entirely certain about this. Still, Charlie had made some good points. So they had come here instead of making a trip to Boyle Hall. She only hoped Charlie was right.

She glanced over at where he was sitting next to her. Ever since he'd tasted the white powder, she'd been keeping a close eye on him. Yet he seemed no worse for wear. Maybe he was from a time far enough in the future that his body was no longer affected by the drugs of 1987. Given the fact that he could fly, she supposed that was likely.

There was another thing that had been troubling her. Charlie seemed to know an awful lot about investigating a story. It made her wonder exactly what type of work he did in the future. Were there even reporters at the time in the future he must come from — given his advanced biology? His familiarity with conducting an investigation suggested that there were. On the other hand, she supposed he could also be a private investigator or even a police officer. No. A reporter was more likely, given his familiarity with newsroom coffee.

She pushed her questions about Charlie to the side, directing her mind back to the investigation. There would be time enough to investigate the mystery of Charlie when Bob Stafford was behind bars where he belonged.

They'd stopped by the Alpha Nu Rho sorority house on the way here where they'd managed to obtain a couple additional pieces of information. Lois had watched in fascination as Molly again used the house's computer to break into the university's computer. This computer thing was going to be a great resource if that was the type of thing that could be done with it. On the other hand, Molly was the computer genius and, as Molly had explained, the only reason she could do this was because the sorority house computer was part of the university computer network.

But still ... as a result of Molly's skills, they had been able to confirm that Angelina and Bob had both taken Environmental Chemistry the previous summer. But the icing on the cake had come when Molly had discovered that during the summer session, Bob and Angelina had also been lab partners.

A call from Cat had topped up their research. And armed with what they now knew, they arrived at the police station and demanded to speak to Henderson.

"Uhh ... I need to make a trip to the restroom," Charlie said suddenly.

"Huh?" she asked, watching in confusion. His hasty exit almost looked like an escape.

"Lane."

Lois turned her attention from where she was still staring at the spot she'd last seen Charlie to look in the direction of someone saying her name. Henderson had entered the room and was walking in her direction. When Charlie had suggested that their next stop should be the police, she'd known immediately whom she would ask for.

As she rose to her feet, she glanced back at where Charlie had vanished. If she didn't know better, she'd almost think that Charlie, in spite of his insistence that they involve the police,

didn't want to be seen by them. Or was it just Henderson? After all, he hadn't had any problem going to the front counter with her.

"What did you want to see me about?" Henderson asked, recapturing Lois' attention.

"Uhh ... yeah." Allowing herself one last thought for Charlie, she directed her mind to why she was there. "I think I've solved one of your murder cases for you."

Henderson's eyebrows rose. She almost expected him to challenge her and marshaled her thoughts to respond.

"Come with me," Henderson said instead, leading her into the back.

Lois took a deep breath. It seemed she was on her own. Well, she had taken on Perry White and won, so surely Henderson couldn't be any more difficult. Still, she stopped briefly at the front counter on her way to the back. "If Charlie King comes back looking for me, could you send him in?" she asked, just in case Charlie's disappearance hadn't been deliberate.

Lois went through the evidence, step by step, carefully laying it all out for Henderson, including the new information Cat had provided them: that Stafford was the one who had alerted the football players to her condition last Friday evening. She'd been relieved when Henderson hadn't questioned her too carefully about how she knew there was a baggy full of what appeared to be illicit drugs stuffed under Stafford's mattress or how she knew about the condition of his DayTimer or about the PH papers found in his room or how they'd found out that Stafford and Angelina had been lab partners during the summer session. It almost reminded her of the army's policy of 'don't ask, don't tell.'

He didn't even question how she'd managed to swipe the little packet of white powder that she'd presented him with. What he did do, however, was instantly send it to the lab — which quickly confirmed that it was, in fact, GHB.

"Okay, I admit it does look like you might be on to something here," Henderson conceded when the lab report came back. "But since GHB is not illegal, I'm still not convinced we have enough for an arrest."

"Uhh ... but is it enough to get a search warrant?" Lois asked, making the argument to him that Charlie had made to her when she'd argued this point during their discussion about whether or not it was time to involve the police.

"A search warrant to do what?"

"Bob has lab space at Boyle Hall. We have reason to believe that's where he's making his drugs."

Henderson cocked his head to the side, as he considered that. "I'll check with the D.A.'s office." He rose to his feet, turning away before turning back towards her. "If I do get this search warrant, I suppose you'll want to come along," he said.

"Yes."

"Okay. It will take a little time, but I think you've earned the right."

Yes! Lois gave a silent air punch as Henderson went to make the necessary arrangements. She could hardly wait to tell Charlie.

Hours of boredom followed by moments of excitement followed by hours of boredom followed by moments of excitement. That was how Lois would later describe the rest of the evening. Charlie had reappeared when she'd returned to the waiting room, bringing with him some take out Chinese food to sustain them while they waited for Henderson to make the appropriate arrangements.

He had disappeared again just before Henderson had come out to tell her he had obtained a search warrant and they were ready to go. Then, he'd met up with her again when she'd emerged from the lab.

Now that was what she called the successful execution of a search warrant.

Not only had they found bottles which were suspected to contain liquid GHB, but they had also found a number of homemade illegal drugs — including ecstasy and LSD — in Bob's lab space. It seemed GHB wasn't Stafford's only source of income. If it could be made in a lab and sold at outrageous prices, Stafford had it.

After that, it had been easy for Henderson to get a couple of additional warrants, one for Stafford's arrest and another to search his room.

When they'd searched Stafford's room, Henderson had easily located his DayTimer and the plastic bag hidden under his mattress, full of more little goodies.

Getting convictions against Stafford for possession for the purposes of trafficking and production of narcotics was going to be a no-brainer — as would the custodial disposition that would undoubtedly follow.

But there was a problem. Yes, if DNA tests turned up what Lois expected them to, they could place Stafford at the scene of the poisoning of Angelina Wesley. And some additional research would likely show he was at the party Mayson Drake had attended last February. And certainly he had been at the party last Friday as Lois could attest. They could prove that Stafford had access to GHB. And with the information Cat Grant had come up with tonight, they could even prove that Stafford was the one who had set her up with the football players.

The problem came in proving that Stafford had been the one who had actually put the GHB in the women's drinks. And even if, when the results came back on the semen found on Angelina's body, a DNA match was made to Stafford, without proof that Stafford had drugged Angelina's drink, it was still problematic that they could prove a murder charge.

"It's not fair, Charlie," Lois complained as they watched from a distance while the police snapped handcuffs on Stafford. "I want him for Angelina's murder!"

"Lois, he's going to prison."

"It won't be enough. There's got to be a way to get him for her murder."

"They got Al Capone for tax evasion. We got Stafford for drug production and trafficking. It's not a bad result, Lois."

"Still, if only ..."

"You!"

Lois spun around at the exclamation to discover that Stafford had spotted her.

"You're dead! Do you hear me? You're dead!" Stafford shouted, straining against the restraints of the police.

Charlie stepped in front of her.

"I will get out of this," Stafford continued to shout even as the police stuffed him in the police car. "And when I do, you're dead! Do you hear me, Lane? You're dead!"

Henderson left the car, walking over to her, and for the first time that evening, when Henderson approached, Charlie didn't disappear. It seemed Charlie was more concerned about her than he was about Henderson.

"Bill Henderson," Henderson said, looking at Charlie.

"Charlie King," Charlie responded.

"Sorry about that," Henderson said, turning his attention to Lois.

Lois shrugged.

"But don't worry. We've got a good case against him. He's not getting out for a long, long time."

"But he will get out eventually," Charlie said, obviously not happy with this development.

"Unless we can get him for Wesley's murder and spiking your and Mayson's drinks," Henderson said. "I'm afraid so."

"What do you need to get him for Angelina's murder?" Lois

asked.

"A confession would be great. Otherwise ... Well, assuming his D.N.A. is a match with the semen we found on Wesley's body, we've got a circumstantial case, and I'll certainly be pressing the D.A. to prosecute. We might get lucky."

"I think I know how to get a confession," Lois said, directing the men's attention to her. "Here's my idea ..."

Clark was enjoying the show as Lois took a seat at her desk at the Ink and Quill and put a piece of paper in her typewriter.

Walking over, he sat down in the chair next to her desk. It was late and, other than someone working on the far side of the room, the main part of the newsroom was empty. There were lights coming from Paul's office, however. A quick look over his glasses informed Clark that Paul was still there.

"Charlie, would you mind seeing if there is any coffee in the coffee room?" Lois asked loudly.

Clark smiled, rising to his feet. "Sure."

"I doubt there's anything fresh, but there's a microwave in there that you could use to heat a cup if there is still some in the pot. I'm going to need some caffeine if I'm going to get this story typed up."

In the empty room, her voice carried and a brief look towards Paul's office told Clark that they had, indeed, been noticed.

Winking at Lois, he walked towards the coffee room as Lois turned her attention to the typewriter.

"What are you doing here?" Paul asked, storming out of the office, obviously not expecting her there after what had happened earlier in the day.

Clark forced himself to stay in the coffee room, although with his glasses half way down his nose, he kept a close eye on the situation. He knew what Lois was doing, but if Paul touched her ...

"I'm typing up my story," Lois said as if confused that he'd even ask.

"I didn't assign you any story."

"Sure you did. Some fluff piece about an art exhibit if I recall correctly."

"If you think ..."

"Oh, I'm not working on that," Lois said, interrupting him. "But I did think you'd want the story on Bob Stafford's arrest."

"What?" Paul gasped.

Lois turned towards him. "I was surprised too. But according to the police, he was running some huge drug operation. They took him into custody tonight so ..."

Her voice trailed off when she was suddenly talking to herself, Paul having rushed back into his office. He took no more than a moment to grab his jacket, before striding past her in his efforts to leave the newsroom.

"I'll just leave the story on your desk," Lois yelled after him.

Smiling, Clark came back over, taking a seat in the chair next to her desk. Her smile met his.

"You don't have to look like you enjoyed that quite so much," Clark said.

"Me? Enjoy setting Paul up? How could you even think such a thing?"

"Let's just hope Henderson can be as convincing on his end," Clark said to which Lois nodded.

"I need to speak to Bob Stafford," Paul said to the duty officer at the front counter of the police station. "I understand he was arrested tonight."

"Just a moment, sir," Constable Gates responded, picking up the phone immediately. "Someone is here to see Bob Stafford."

Paul drummed his fingers on the counter as he waited.

"If you would like to have a seat, sir, I'm sure someone will be with you shortly."

"I'm fine," Paul responded, continuing to stand at the counter, becoming more and more agitated as the seconds ticked past into minutes. He was jostled and hassled by the continual procession of people coming into the police station as officers and their prisoners settled into their usual Friday night ritual.

The place smelled of unwashed bodies, stale cigarette smoke and beer. Bodies brushed past him. Someone did brief battle with a police officer, until the officer laid him out on the counter in front of Paul.

"Sorry," the officer muttered as he pulled the stunned man off the counter, causing Paul to stumble back in the process.

Paul was just about to give up, deciding to return in the morning when it wasn't so busy, when a plain-clothed officer stepped from the back and asked the duty officer who was wanting to speak to Stafford.

"That would be me," Paul said, stepping up closer to the counter.

"Detective Henderson," the other man answered. "I'm sorry. But Stafford has just been processed. He can't have visitors until morning."

"Can't you make an exception?" Paul asked. "I'm Paul Benson. I'm ... with the Ink and Quill. I really need to see if I can get a quote for my story tonight." He pulled out his Ink and Quill press pass which Henderson examined.

"Sorry. It's against police policy to allow reporters to talk to prisoners."

Henderson turned back towards the doors he'd only come through moments before.

"Detective, please," Paul said, stopping Henderson's retreat. "Look ... I'm only a student reporter. And ... this is my big break. Couldn't you bend the rules just this once? It is a NTU story after all. It should be reported first by the NTU paper. And by tomorrow, all the big papers will be crawling all over this. Please. It would be really great if we could say we got the story first."

Henderson stared at him for a long moment. "I'd like to help," he finally said. "Seeing you cut the legs out from under the Daily Planet would be great — given the hassle they give us on a regular basis ... But even if I were inclined to help, we don't have any interview rooms available." He gestured around at the crowd. "Busy night."

"Surely something ..."

"Detective?" interrupted Constable Gates.

"Hmm?" Henderson responded, moving closer to the officer.

"What about interview room four?" she whispered.

"Nothing doing," Henderson whispered back. "All the recording equipment in interview room four is down. Hell, we can't even hear what's going on in there. If we put him in there with Stafford and something goes wrong, we wouldn't be able to react quickly enough. What if something happened to him? I'm not going to be the officer who's dragged across the front page of some paper for letting a reporter get hurt."

"I'll take that risk, Detective," Paul said. Henderson looked up at him in surprise. He must not have realized he was listening into the conversation. "I'll sign a waiver. Whatever you need me to sign," Paul continued.

When he could see Henderson vacillating, he continued. "It would really help me out to get this quote for my story tonight. Come on, Detective. Please. If I could scoop the Daily Planet ... have this story make it into the Ink and Quill before they even know there's a story to be had ... Come on. How about it? Bend the rules a little. Just this once." He could only hope Henderson didn't know that the Ink and Quill was a weekly paper, or that it had already come out for this week, or that any story he did decide to write couldn't be published until next Friday.

Finally, Henderson let out a breath. "Okay." He held up a finger. "If Stafford agrees, we'll set it up. But if anything happens ..."

"I'll take full responsibility."

Talk about luck. Not only was he going to get a chance to talk to Bob, but he was actually going to get to do it without fear of the police listening in.

Paul quickly signed the waiver without even bothering to read it in spite of Henderson's instructions that he read through it carefully and ask for clarification if he had any questions. What mattered now was talking to Bob.

"Okay, if you just want to come this way, Mr. Benson," Henderson said.

"So how exactly did you catch Stafford, Detective?" Paul asked as he followed Henderson down the hall.

"Apparently, he spiked some girl's drink with GHB at a party last Friday. She came to see us about it. Turned out to be a great tip. Could hardly believe the amount of drugs we found when we executed the warrant."

"I didn't think GHB was illegal."

"It isn't. But spiking some girl's drink with it is. It's called administering a noxious substance. And then when we executed the warrant ... Like raiding a candy store for junkies."

"What was the girl's name?" Paul asked, flipping open his notebook as if to write it down for his story. "You know ... the one who gave you the original tip."

"Uhh ... Damn. What was it again? Lois ... Lois ..."

"Lois Lane?"

"Yeah. That's it. A bit pushy. But turned out to be a good tip so ... Well, here we are."

The detective opened the door to interview room four and Paul stepped inside. "If you just want to wait here," Henderson said. "It will take us a few minutes to get Stafford."

Paul sat down at the table, a smirk making its way onto his lips. Henderson had obviously bought his story hook, line and sinker. And boy, was he good. Getting Henderson to agree to this ... How many other reporters could have talked their way in to interview a suspect the way he had?

He quickly wiped the smirk off his face when the door opened again and Bob was brought into the room and taken around to a chair on the other side of the table.

"Maybe it would be best if I stayed in here with you," Henderson said as the officer got Bob settled.

"It's okay, Detective," Paul responded. "I have a number of questions I want to ask and I'm sure you have better things to do than babysit me."

For a moment, Henderson looked torn. "If you're sure," he finally said. "Just pound on the door when you want out. There will be an officer just outside, ready to come in at a moment's notice. And ... " He pointed to the glass mirrors. "... we'll have someone watching at all times."

"Thank you, Detective," Paul said before watching as Henderson stepped out of the room and closed the door. He made certain he heard the door click shut before turning towards Bob, who was watching him carefully.

Henderson patted his vest pocket, assuring himself that the warrant he'd obtained to record this conversation between Stafford and Benson was there before sitting down in the recording booth to see what this might turn up. If Lane was right about this, and he'd yet to see her wrong, this conversation should be very, very interesting.

"What the hell did you think you were doing spiking Lane's drink?" Paul demanded immediately. "You didn't think she'd figure it out and start snooping around."

"What are you talking about? I didn't spike Lane's drink?" With that, Bob glanced around meaningfully.

"Would you relax! Their recording equipment is down. They

can't hear a word we say."

"Are you sure?"

Paul rolled his eyes. "Of course I'm sure. Do you think I would risk it if I wasn't? So what the hell did you think you were doing putting GHB in Lane's drink? You told me you gave up that nonsense after Wesley's death."

"Who are you? My mother now?"

"It was bad enough that you killed Wesley ..."

"You know why Wesley had to die!" Bob responded. "She was going to report my activities to the police."

"And you couldn't buy her off?" Paul asked. "You had to kill her!"

"Of course I killed her. It solved the problem didn't it?"

"Oh, yeah. It solved the problem ... Or might have except for your little fetish for screwing strong women when they can't fight back. Or did you forget that little 'sample' you left behind? That was fine when they didn't have a suspect. But have you ever heard of DNA testing? They can now positively identify a person's semen."

"Of course I've heard of DNA testing," Bob said. "I know my science."

"Well, then, you tell me. How long do you think it will be before they get a warrant to compare your DNA with the DNA from the semen they found on Wesley's body? Why do you think I tried to kill Lane's story? To keep the police from realizing the connection between Wesley's death and other ... incidents on campus!"

"And now ... Because you spiked Lane's drink, she came to the police and they got a search warrant and found your drug supply. And now look at you! You and your stupid fetish. And what about Carol? I thought you were serious about her."

"One has nothing to do with the other. And for your information, I didn't touch Lane. Not with a ten foot pole. I just ... put the GHB in her drink and pointed a couple of ticked off football players in her direction. Even managed to sweeten the pot by hinting that Lane was telling the truth about the cheating scandal being her story. Said we were planning to print a correction in next week's edition of the Ink and Quill." He smirked. "Last I saw, Lane was off to have the party of her life. She should thank me. Probably the only fun she'll ever have."

"You idiot!" Paul said, rising to his feet. "You just couldn't let it go, could you? Couldn't stand it that Lane didn't worship the ground you walk on. Just had to teach her a lesson."

"Yes, I taught her a lesson! It was a lesson she needed to learn! No one messes with us and gets away with it!" Bob said.

"Us?" Paul asked in disbelief.

"Yes! Of course, us!" Bob said, jumping to his feet so that they were facing each other across the narrow table. "Lane needed to be put in her place! And I figured that if I pointed a couple football players in her direction, Lane would end up just like Mayson last year and drop out of school. Then you and your little girlfriend wouldn't have to worry about her muddying the waters with her claim that the football story was hers."

"You idiot! How dare you blame this on me? I'm not the one who has a problem with strong women! And I'm certainly not the one who gets his kicks from having sex with nearly comatose women!"

"Well, at least I can complete the act. How's Linda doing these days anyway? Any ... frustration showing?"

"Okay, get the men in there," Henderson said. "I think we've got what we need and we don't want ... " His instructions were cut off when Paul Benson lunged across the table at Stafford. "Get the men in there now!" Henderson yelled, running towards the door to the interview room.

The door opened as the scuffle continued. Henderson rushed into the room only to be hit when Stafford pushed Benson

backwards into him. Both of them were knocked off their feet. Henderson's head hit the wall and everything went black.

What happened after that, Henderson didn't know — at least from firsthand knowledge. All he did know was that when he regained consciousness, Stafford had managed to escape. And in the process, had snagged himself a gun.

Holding a cloth to his forehead to staunch the bleeding from the cut on his brow, Henderson picked up the phone and took a deep breath before dialing Lane's number. Given Stafford's threats when he'd been arrested, it seemed the prudent thing to do.

"So what do we do with him?" one of the officers asked, directing Henderson's attention to where the officer was standing with Paul Benson.

"Arrest him," Henderson said without batting an eye.

"Arrest me?" Benson asked in disbelief. "On what charge?"

"Assault, facilitating an escape, accessory to murder after the fact ... and I'm sure I'll think of a few more before the night is out."

"I didn't facilitate Bob's escape. That was your incompetence. And ... how exactly do you get accessory to murder? I didn't help murder anyone," Paul objected, as the officer grabbed his arm, pulled his hands behind his back and fastened the cuffs on him. "How could you think ..."

"You don't think we were listening in? Recording everything you and that bastard said?" Henderson asked in disbelief as he continued to listen to Lane's phone ring. "Remember that waver you signed? In it, you gave us permission to do exactly that. Between that and the warrant we obtained, I doubt we'll have any problem getting that information admitted in court — against either of you. And during that conversation, you admitted that you killed Lane's story to keep Stafford from being connected to Wesley's murder. How is that not accessory after the fact?"

"So I killed a story I thought was light on facts. That's my job," Paul objected.

Henderson shrugged. "We'll let the D.A. sort it all out. In the meantime ... diving across the table at Stafford is definitely assault." He looked at the officer holding Benson. "Get him the hell out of here."

As Paul Benson was manhandled out of the room, Henderson slammed down the phone. Where was Lane anyway? He'd said he'd give her a call at her dorm after they found out if their little ruse to get Stafford to talk worked. Well, what were the chances that Stafford would really go after her, anyway? Surely a college kid like him would know his best chance of escape was to go far and hide deep.

"So you're not going to write up the story tonight?" Charlie asked as they approached her dorm.

Lois shook her head. "The Ink and Quill doesn't come out until next Friday. I do need to write it up for the Daily Planet, but I can't really do that until I know exactly what the story is going to be. Since Henderson said he'd call as soon as he knew if our little deception works, I'll wait until then."

She stopped outside her door. "Are you sure I can't convince you to come in ... wait with me for Henderson's call?"

"I don't think so. We don't know when he'll call. And it's late. I figure I'll just go back to my room, maybe get a little sleep. I take it you're not going to be leaving your room again tonight?"

Lois shook her head. "I'll make a call to Molly ... bring her up to speed ... but ..." She hesitated. She really didn't want him leaving until they had a chance to talk. On the other hand, it had been a really long day and she was exhausted. She could use a nap too while she waited for Henderson's call. "Promise me that I'll see you in the morning?" she asked.

He looked at her for a long moment and she thought she understood his struggle. Part of him was obviously tempted to

jump into his time machine now that they'd solved the case and she was safe. But then he broke eye contact, and she knew she had won.

"I promise," he said softly.

She gave him a smile that she hoped he would read as gratitude. He seemed to. His hand came out and he lightly touched her arm.

"Good night, Lois," he said softly before turning and walking back down the hall.

She watched until he disappeared into the stairwell before turning towards the door to her room.

Lois tossed her jacket on a chair as she walked across her room to the telephone. Picking it up, she quickly punched in the number to the Alpha Nu Rho sorority house to bring Molly up to speed. As she did, she glanced at the clock. No wonder she was tired. It was after one a.m. She just hoped that it wasn't too late to call ...

"Hang up the phone, Lane."

The voice sent a chill through her. Spinning around, she found herself looking down the barrel of a gun. She had to drag her eyes away to focus on the man pointing it at her. Bob.

"Hello."

She heard the sleepy voice on the other end of the line.

"You won't get away with this, Bob," Lois said. "The first place the police will think to look for you after your escape is my dorm room. Your only hope ..."

"Hang up the phone!" Bob repeated, firing a shot into the floor in front of her.

"Okay, okay," she said, quickly doing as directed.

"Now ..." Bob said, giving her an evil smile. "You and I are going to have a little fun before I kill you. It's time you learned exactly what it means to be a woman."

Clark was half asleep when the sound of police cars driving past the motel woke him up again. Groggily, he sat up in bed. Great. Just what he needed. Another emergency to attend to.

Wait a minute! There was no Superman here, so this wasn't his problem ... whatever it was. He would just let the police handle it.

That decided, he lay back down, only to hear the distinctive sound of an ambulance.

"Not my problem," he told himself again, closing his eyes.

But for some reason, he could no longer make himself relax. Throwing back the covers in frustration, he finally sat up. Well, he wasn't going to get any sleep until he knew what was going on so ... Pulling on his clothes, he headed for the door. He wouldn't do anything super, though. Just a walk by to see what was going on and then he'd come back to bed.

His pace was casual. He found it almost relaxing strolling down the deserted city streets. The sound of sirens had ended quite some time ago. Obviously, whatever the problem was, the police had solved it without help from the man in red and blue. His decision not to get involved had been the right one.

He had no destination in mind. But from force of habit, he found himself turning the corner onto the New Troy University campus, and suddenly his footsteps faltered.

The sirens were gone, but there was no mistaking the flashing red and blue lights up ahead.

Suddenly, his heart was pounding painfully as he realized where he was. His feet picked up their pace — stroll to march to jog to run.

He saw Stafford being brought out of the building, hair messed up, clothing skewed, blood on his face and hands and soaking the front of his shirt.

No!

"Lois!" he yelled, not bothering to pause to look at Stafford being folded into a police car. Not noticing the crowd of students gawking at the spectacle, in whispered voices trying to figure out what was happening.

Instead, his eyes were focused on the door to the building. Running up the front steps. Pushing through the doors. How fast was he moving? He really couldn't have said. But he didn't stop on the first floor. Instead, he was in the stairway almost immediately, taking the steps two at a time as he bounded up the stairs and onto Lois' floor.

He'd changed the future. What if as a result of that, Lois had been killed in 1987? Had his decision to come into the past resulted in Lois dying six years earlier than she would have otherwise?

Oh, god. Not his problem. When he'd heard sirens so close to the university, how could he have ever thought it was not his problem?

Pulling open the door, Clark rushed into the hallway on Lois' floor.

"Hey, buddy," an officer said, stepping out in front of him, a hand coming to rest on his chest, "where do you think you're going?"

"Let him through," Henderson said, spotting Clark.

"Where is she?" Clark demanded, not bothering with the formalities, not caring that Henderson was getting a good look at him, not caring about anything, in fact, except Lois.

"She's ..."

Clark didn't bother to wait for the rest of whatever Henderson might say. Instead, he was through the doorway to Lois' room.

Suddenly, his footsteps faltered.

The room was empty. She wasn't there. His eyes found themselves riveted to the bloodstain soaking the large throw rug on the floor. He heard the door close behind him — Henderson must have decided to give him some privacy — and sank to the floor next to the rug.

"Lois," he breathed, his hand hovering slightly above the fresh stains. He should have known. He should have been here. Not his problem? What a joke. It had most definitely been his problem ... and he'd failed her.

"Yes?"

His head snapped up in shock. It took him a moment to realize that what he was seeing was not an apparition, but a real, flesh and blood version of the woman he loved. Without further thought, he was on his feet and she was lost in his arms. He whispered her name over and over, planting kisses on her hair, cheeks, face, neck, bare upper arms ...

Suddenly, the whole picture of what he had seen when he'd first looked up filtered its way into his mind.

Lois Lane ... wearing nothing but a towel.

Lois wasn't sure what shocked her more, being lost in Charlie's arms while he planted kisses on every piece of bare skin he could find or Charlie suddenly releasing her to back a couple steps away from her.

"I thought ..." He gestured to the rug.

"Oh, that," she said with a grimace. "Guess there's no way to get the blood out of that, is there?"

A quick knock on the door was followed by Henderson poking his head inside. "Sorry," he said when he, too, took in what she was wearing. "I thought we were finished, but ..." He gestured to the rug. "Guess we should hold onto that, too."

"It's all yours," Lois said with feeling.

Henderson came into the room and, keeping his eyes firmly focused on his task, rolled up the rug and carried it out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Another knock on the door and Lois rolled her eyes, stepping

past Charlie to open it a crack.

Linda.

Just what she didn't need right now.

"Lois, what's going ..."

Lois closed and locked the door, ignoring Linda's muttered protests, before turning back towards Charlie.

He looked as if he were in shock, not quite registering what was happening around him.

"I thought ..." He managed to get out before his mouth seemed unable to continue, as if to voice what he had thought would somehow make it so.

All of a sudden, it sunk in what he had thought. She took a slow, cautious step towards him, feeling much as if she were trying to approach a restive horse.

"Shhhh," she whispered, bringing her hand up slowly. "It's okay," she whispered again, her hand gently coming to rest against his cheek.

"I thought ..." he repeated.

"I know," she whispered, tenderly stroking his cheek. "I'm okay. I'm okay."

"But ... how ..."

"Bob apparently escaped from the police station," she began, keeping her voice soft and even. "Paul got him to admit to everything. And then there was some sort of skirmish and ..." She shrugged. "Anyway, he must have come directly here, because he was in my room when I came in."

"What?"

"I had just called Molly," she quickly continued before he could launch into some sort of self-recriminations for not coming in with her. "He told me to hang up the phone. Molly had already answered so she realized what was going on and called the police. Apparently, they were already on their way."

"Did ... Did he hurt you?" he asked, gesturing to her state of undress.

She glanced down at the towel. "No. I just ended up with so much of his blood on me that ... Maybe I should just tell you what happened." She took a deep breath, knowing this next part was going to bother him and trying to think of how to tell him without having him panic.

"He had a gun. I knew that he planned to ... hurt me ... before he killed me." She chose that one word carefully, more for his sake than her own. "By his attitude, I realized cooperation wouldn't save my life. That meant my only option was to fight." She let out a slow breath, trying not to relive that moment. "And I knew I was only going to get one chance. So I waited until he began walking towards me. When he stepped on the rug, I bent down and pulled with all my might. He went flying. The gun fired ..."

"What?"

"It was nowhere near me," Lois rushed to add. "When he came down, he hit his head against the corner of my desk. I rushed over and grabbed the gun, but by the time I got it and turned around, I realized he was out cold. I was tying him up when Henderson arrived. So ... I'm fine." She gave him a smile. "Lois Lane one. Bob Stafford zero."

He didn't smile back like she had hoped he would so she continued. "I never realized how much head wounds bleed. I ended up getting blood all over me while I was tying him up. So once Henderson finished up and I called Molly to let her know everything was all right, I went into the bathroom and had a shower. Then I came back out here and ... you know the rest."

He finally seemed to be breathing again. If she hadn't known it was impossible, she'd have sworn he'd stopped when she was telling her story.

"So you're really okay?" he asked again.

"I'm really okay," she said, taking a step back and turning a full circle so that he could see for himself that nothing was

missing.

"Okay. Good," Charlie said. "I'm ... glad. Well then. Okay. Well ... you're probably tired so ..."

"Charlie?" she said, stopping his retreat from where he was inching his way towards the door.

"Yeah?"

She hesitated for a moment, trying to work up her nerve. She could hear the blood suddenly pounding in her ears. Her breathing was coming hard and heavy.

"Stay with me?" she asked, her hand coming up to where the towel was joined.

A moment later, the towel had come to rest in a puddle around her feet.

Clark wasn't entirely certain his brain hadn't shut down from lack of oxygen. 'Stay with me.' That single phrase kept repeating itself in his head.

She made it sound so easy. 'Stay with me.' Did she mean for tonight? Tomorrow? Or was her request much more permanent.

'Stay with me.'

If only he could. But he didn't belong here. He had to go back to the future. It was the responsible thing to do.

'Stay with me.'

And suddenly, he knew that was exactly what he was going to do. Not just for an hour or a week or a year. He had no way to get back to the future anyway. And he wasn't entirely sure he would go back even if he could. Back to a life that was no life.

This was where he belonged, with her, in her arms. A place that existed, not in black and white and maybe shades of gray, but a place bursting with color and possibilities.

Her expression changed, followed by a movement of her hands, as if she was suddenly wondering about the wisdom of her impulsive move. He was taking too long.

"Yes," he said, stepping towards her. "Yes," he repeated, wrapping her in his arms as his mouth landed on hers.

A small sound seeped from the back of her throat and then her arms were around his neck and she was kissing him with the same abandon he was showing her. His arm slipped under her legs. He picked her up in his arms as the kiss continued. In only two steps, he was placing a knee on her bed to gently place her on the surface.

He pulled back far enough to meet her eyes, silently assuring himself that this was really what she wanted. She reached for him and, without further thought, he surrendered all that he was and all that he would ever be to the woman he loved.

Lois rolled onto her side, propping her head on her hand so that she could better observe the man sleeping beside her. A tender expression settled on her face as she watched him, tracing every line and shadow that was him with her eyes. The light seeping through the window cast his features in an exotic contrast of light and dark, giving him a mysterious quality. Sort of like the man himself.

She couldn't help the small giggle that erupted from the back of her throat as her mind flashed back. She'd always wondered what it would be like when she finally took that step into intimacy with a man, but never could she have imagined anything like that. She wasn't sure he even realized it, but at one point, she was pretty sure they'd actually been floating.

Well, she supposed that answered the question of whether he was using some sort of future technology to accomplish the flying thing because, at that moment, he hadn't had very many places to hide high tech gadgets.

She buried her head in her pillow to muffle the laughter that rippled through her body. When she finally got control of herself, she looked back at Charlie — hoping he was still asleep or if not, that he hadn't heard her laughter and misunderstood it. But he

was still sound asleep. The steady rise and fall of his gorgeous chest was proof enough of that.

"Mmm ... mmm ... mmm," she murmured as she allowed her eyes to wander over that absolutely perfect chest.

Her breathing had deepened when she finally pulled her eyes away. Well, if she didn't stop that soon, she was going to be waking him up to do it all over again. And he obviously needed his sleep.

Besides, she had a story to write. Slipping quietly out of bed, she spotted Charlie's well-washed, faded University of Kansas t-shirt on the floor. Grabbing it, she slipped it over her head, satisfied with the result when it came down to her mid-thigh.

She turned on the small desk lamp and then glanced back at Charlie, relaxing when she saw that he was still asleep. Sitting down at her desk, she took one longing look at her typewriter before pulling out a pad of paper. This story would be written in long hand. No need to risk disturbing him with the sound of the typewriter. Turning her attention to her story, she began to write.

Clark woke to the sound of the phone ringing once. Sounds of a scramble and a muttered curse were followed by a whispered 'Hello.'

"Oh, hi, Molly," Lois whispered.

Without consciously deciding to do it, Clark's ears automatically focused in to hear both sides of the conversation.

"I just called to find out how you were this morning — you know, after last night's excitement," Molly said.

"Last night's excitement?"

"You know ... Bob trying to kill you."

"Oh right. That."

"What did you think I was talking about?"

"Nothing."

There was a brief pause. "Why are you whispering?" Molly asked, suddenly sounding suspicious.

"Whispering? I'm not whispering," Lois whispered.

"Yes, you are. He's there, isn't he? He's asleep and you're trying not to wake him."

"Who?" Lois was trying to sound innocent, but Clark couldn't help but smile at how badly she was failing.

"You know exactly who. Charlie, that's who."

Lois sighed. "Okay, so maybe he is here."

"Oh, so let me guess ... It isn't quite what it looks like."

No response.

"Lois?"

No response.

"Oh my god, it's exactly what it looks like, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Lois said.

Molly's resulting squeal had Clark flinching slightly. Obviously, Molly hadn't believed her.

"So ... how was it?" Molly finally asked.

"Molly ... I don't ... I just ..."

"Oh, girl," Molly interrupted with a laugh. "You really are the worst liar. Okay, I won't probe. But ... you really do have it bad for this guy, don't you?"

"I really do," Lois said, a smile in her voice. "I really, really do."

"Okay, well ... I'll let you get back to it ..."

"Molly, he's asleep. We're not ..."

"Better not keep him waiting then," Molly interrupted with a laugh.

"Bye, Molly," Lois said, chuckling softly at her friend's antics as she hung up the phone.

For a moment, she was silent, although he had the impression she was watching him.

"Okay, faker," she said, her tone amused. "You can open your eyes now. I know you're awake."

"Absolutely not," he responded without opening his eyes.

"I'm asleep. There's only one way to wake me up."

"And how's that?"

"Ever heard of Sleeping Beauty?"

He could hear her rise to her feet and begin walking back to the bed.

"Sleeping Beauty?" she asked, sounding amused. "Yeah ... I guess it fits."

He felt the bed next to him depress.

"Now ... let's see if I can remember how that story goes again," Lois said. "Sleeping Beauty — that would be you — has gone to sleep. Some evil spell or something. The handsome prince — that would be me — comes along and ... I know I need to do something. If only I could remember what ... Oh right. I do this."

With lightning speed, she was suddenly tickling him. His eyes flew open, laughing as he tried to protect himself against her probing hands. Reaching out, he grabbed her, flipping her over him onto the bed so that he had her pinned beneath them as they both laughed.

"Well now," he said when their laughter ended, "this is an interesting development." He allowed his eyes to roam down her body, taking in the fact that she was wearing nothing more than his t-shirt, examining how his hands were holding her wrists against the bed, reveling in the way her body was trapped beneath his.

He heard her heart rate jump a notch as she seemed to register everything he had. Unable to resist, his mouth descended on hers. And for a long time, no further words were spoken as the two young lovers spent the next hour once again exploring the secrets of each other's bodies.

For a long time, Clark simply stared at the defective time machine. He already knew what he was going to do. So it wasn't indecision that made him hesitate. No, it was the fact that this machine, regardless of its faults, had brought him here. And for that, he owed it a lot.

Still, this was the prudent course of action. Leaving the time machine somewhere where another might find it, figure it out and start using it for himself was not a responsibility Clark wanted on his shoulders.

Giving a final sigh, he dropped it, watching as it sunk through three thousand fathoms of water to settle in the silt on the ocean floor.

Dragging herself back out of bed this morning had taken every ounce of self-control Lois Lane possessed. But she'd had a story to submit to Perry White and she wanted to get it in before the deadline for the afternoon edition — even if she didn't know what time that was. Getting it in the morning edition would have been impossible anyway, given that she hadn't had the whole story until close to two thirty this morning.

After that, she had gotten a little ... distracted. Still, following her little diversion with Charlie this morning, she'd forced herself out of bed and into the shower. His question as she'd walked into the bathroom had certainly tested her levels of self-control. It seemed that now that she'd crossed that particular intimacy threshold, she couldn't quite seem to get enough of Charlie.

"Can I join you?" he'd asked.

Still, she'd forced herself to remain strong. She knew other reporters would undoubtedly be digging around in the whole Bob Stafford affair. She had hoped, though, they didn't have the story she would be submitting. Turned out she had been right. Since the original arrest had been for production and trafficking charges, that was what the other news organizations had picked up on. The Daily Planet would be running a different headline. 'Stafford Arrested For Wesley Murder.'

Perry White had looked up at her in shock several times

while reading. Then he'd chopped her story apart into four, full size stories, claiming that this was far too important and complex for a single story.

Since Paul was currently under arrest — although Lois didn't know the details on that development yet — Perry had contacted the staff advisor for the Ink and Quill and quickly hammered out a deal with him — one that had involved a promise from the advisor that her stories not be shown any prejudice in the future due to her bringing this one to the Daily Planet and explaining why she'd brought them the previous story.

As a result, she was going to have the lead story in the afternoon edition of the Daily Planet today, together with three more stories inside the paper.

At that point, they'd discussed follow-up stories. He'd asked her if she wanted them. At first, she'd opened her mouth to accept. But then she'd remembered Charlie.

They had a lot still to talk about. And she was surprised to realize that he was more important to her than getting more copy space in any paper, even the Daily Planet. So she'd ceded to Perry's request that he assign a couple of his reporters to begin pounding the streets for follow up stories. However, he had demanded one final story of her. A side-bar of her encounter with Bob Stafford after his escape. She'd readily agreed and found a desk at the Planet to write up that encounter.

She smiled as she thought about what had happened then. She wondered what Charlie would think when she told him that she was going to be the first freshmen ever to be given a summer internship at the Daily Planet. And ... it was only November!

She rolled her eyes. What were the chances that Charlie would even understand what an honor this was? Oh, he'd be pleased for her — especially if he was a reporter at some point in the distant future. Molly would be pleased for her, too. They would be excited because she was excited. But they wouldn't understand. Not really.

For the first time, she regretted the loss of her friendship with Linda. Linda would have understood ... and been as jealous as hell. Okay, maybe it was better that she was no longer friends with Linda.

She juggled the bag containing the subs from one arm to the other as she climbed the stairs to her floor.

She hoped Charlie was back by now. When she'd left, he'd said he had something he needed to take care of, too. She'd been a little unclear about what that was, but they had promised to meet back at her room for lunch so that they could talk in private. She was glad she'd had an extra key to her room to give him.

She giggled, suddenly having some very erotic images of just what a 'private lunch' between her and Charlie might entail. Using her tongue to chase some sub sauce down his bare chest was a particularly appealing image — although not quite as appealing as having him do the same to her. If it were chocolate sauce on the other hand ...

'Stop it, Lois,' she silently rebuked herself. They needed to talk. And that was exactly what she intended to see that they did.

'And after that you can explore that chocolate sauce fantasy,' the little devil sitting on her shoulder whispered into her ear.

Again, she giggled.

Stopping outside her door, she dug into her pocket for her key. She could hear sounds coming from inside her room. Obviously, Charlie had beaten her back. Fitting the key in the lock, it only took her a moment to open the door.

'Hi, honey. I'm home,' was what she had intended to say. What she said instead was, "Charlie!"

Slamming the door shut behind her and rushing across the room, she fell to her knees next to where he was doubled over on the floor, a slight whimper coming from the back of his throat, his head buried beneath his hands, as if he were trying to hold his head together as his body convulsed.

No. This was not a normal headache. Something was very wrong with him.

"Charlie," she said, reaching out to hold him before hesitating. If he was convulsing, should she be trying to restrain him or ...

She jumped to her feet and pushed the furniture back to ensure he didn't hurt himself and then stood there, silently crying out to whatever gods might be listening not to take him from her as tears streaked her cheeks. Just when she thought she could not bear to see him in pain one moment longer, his convulsions began to ease, his body finally relaxing.

Dropping to her knees next to him, she finally gathered his body against her. Closing her eyes, she sent up a silent prayer of thanks to whomever had granted him relief. She had no idea how long she sat there, just holding him against her before he finally looked up.

She gasped.

"Wha ..." she began, staring at him as if taking in a stranger. Reaching out a trembling hand, she touched the fully grown beard now covering his face.

Lois paced her room as she waited for Charlie to emerge from the bathroom. He was feeling quite a bit better. Oh, his movements were still slightly stilted, indicating that his joints were still sore. Not the easy grace she was used to seeing from him at all.

She was beginning to have a suspicion about what was wrong with him. The problem was going to be getting him to talk about it — given his insistence that he was fine, that it was just a headache, that it was just a failure to shave this morning. But the length of his beard was not natural, not over that length of time. He'd had no more than a shadow on his face when he'd woken up this morning — so it wasn't as if his quick beard growth could be attributed to his unusual biology. No, there was something else going on here.

She turned when the door to the bathroom opened and Charlie stepped out.

He shrugged sheepishly. "See," he said, rubbing his newly shaved chin. "Problem solved."

She narrowed her eyes. Laying aside the question of where he had obtained shaving equipment — he could have borrowed hers, after all — she could hardly believe how easily he was prepared to dismiss this matter.

"How long have you been having these 'headaches,' Charlie."

"Lois, I don't ..."

"Did you have them before you started traveling in time?"

"Wha ..."

"Is it possible this is ... I don't know. Some sort of time traveling sickness?"

He sank down onto the side of her bed, seeming stunned by her question. "How long have you known?"

She let out a breath, stepping over to the bed to take a seat next to him. "Almost since the beginning."

"How ..."

She smiled. "I'm an investigative reporter, remember."

"You saw the time machine," he said. "I should have known when you just ignored this huge tarp-covered machine in the middle of my motel room that you'd figured everything out."

"Yes, I saw the time machine — and your plans for the time machine. But I also remembered you. My guardian angel. The man who rescued me from falling out of a tree when I was nine. The one who told me that guardian angels don't have names." She reached up and gently stroked his cheek. "Did you really think I wouldn't figure it out?"

He looked down. "I was going to tell you. Today. It was one of the things I was planning to tell you. I should have told you last night before we ..." He looked up at her, seemingly searching

her eyes for signs that she was angry.

She leaned over, giving him a light kiss to alleviate his obvious fear. "One of the things you were going to tell me? Was the other one that you can fly?"

She had to admit, the stunned expression that appeared on his face was somewhat rewarding.

"How ..."

"My guardian angel flew. That was one of the things that made me doubt my conclusion that you were actually the same man who rescued me when I was nine."

"Lois, I'm not a guardian angel. I'm not an angel of any kind."

She smirked. "If I had any doubts about that, last night would have convinced me that an angel is the last thing you are."

Her smirk turned to a full fledged smile when a blush appeared on his cheeks. "No, Charlie ... I never thought you were an angel. Even if I believed in angels, the fact that you needed a time machine would have dispelled that notion.

"As to how I know that you can fly ... I know you were the one who rescued that truck a week ago. I recognized your glasses in those pictures ... and I saw your reaction to the news report. You had to fly to rescue that truck. You also flew when you boosted me over the wall to get away from Frank at the football stadium.

"At first, I thought you must have some high-tech gadget from the future that allowed you to fly. But after last night ... I guess the only conclusion I can come up with is that you come from a time in the future when mankind has evolved to the point where we can fly."

"What do you mean, after last night?" he asked cautiously.

"Charlie ... we floated."

He stared at her in disbelief. Obviously, he hadn't noticed. It was nice to know how distracting she could actually be.

"So when are you from, Charlie? I figure it has to be a long time in the future. The superior hearing. The speed. The strength. The flying. How many thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of years would have to pass for us to evolve to that state?"

He looked down. "You're right. I do come from the future, but I'm the only one there who can fly. Lois, there's something you need to know ..."

Lois splashed some cold water on her face before looking at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She'd thought she'd been ready for anything. But never in her wildest imagination would she have come up with a story like Charlie ... no, Clark had just told her.

A planet named Krypton. A small space ship being flung trillions of miles across space. Landing in a field in Kansas. Being adopted by a local farmer and his wife. Having his adopted parents die when he was ten. Getting a job at the Daily Planet — she'd been right; he was a reporter. Developing super hearing and smell, x-ray vision, laser vision, super strength and invulnerability. And then, and this was a big one ... becoming Superman.

It had all been too much. Too impossible. She still wasn't certain how his headaches fit in with the invulnerability — they hadn't yet discussed that. But she'd needed a moment to digest it all.

Still, he could travel through time. He could fly. So really, was the rest all that unbelievable?

No. Not really. And no matter what name he went by ... Charlie King or Clark Kent ... Whether he was a human or Kryptonian ... Whether he was born on this planet or another one ... he was still the man she loved.

Having reached that conclusion, she quickly dried her face and opened the door. Taking a deep breath, she stepped back into

the room to see the nervous man pacing back and forth. He stopped when she entered, looking at her with fear in his eyes.

Her heart immediately went out to him. Without hesitation, she walked over to where he was standing, stepping up close enough to wrap her arms around his waist and bury her face in his chest.

"I love you, Clark Kent," she said softly.

The tension in his body seemed to drain away as his arms pulled her closer. "Thank, god," he breathed into her hair. "Because I love you so much and the thought of losing you ..."

Before he could finish, one of her hands had left its position around his waist so that she could pull his head down and capture his mouth in a kiss. It was the first time they had ever exchanged those words, after all. And she wasn't about to miss the moment. Everything else could wait.

"So ..." she said, finally ending the kiss and stepping away. She noticed his distracted expression and had to fight off a giggle. In another time and place, he might be Superman, hero to millions, but here, in her hands, he was putty. And it was kinda a heady thought. "Anyway," she said, realizing that she had gotten distracted, too, "you never did say exactly when you came from."

"Uhh ..." He paused, as if having to bring his mind around to her question. "1997."

Her eyebrows went up. "Only ten years?" That surprised her. "So if you're working for the Daily Planet in 1997, you must know me." She smiled. "Are we partners? I bet we're great together."

"Uhh ..." Clark said, suddenly looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"Uh oh," she thought. Something was wrong with this picture. What? Did they hate each other? Had they each married other people before they ever had a chance to meet? Whatever it was, something was obviously wrong between them in 1997 — and she'd just stepped right into it. Suddenly, she didn't want to know.

"Lois ..."

"Well, anyway," she said before he could complete his thought. Why did he have to suddenly look so serious anyway. "I guess that means ..."

"Lois ..."

"I don't want to hear it, Char ... Clark. I don't want to hear anything except that you love me and that you'll never leave me."

"I love you," Clark said, stepping closer. "With all my heart. And I promise, I will never leave unless you send me away." His hand came up to cup her cheek. "The future is whatever we make it."

She closed her eyes when he leaned in, anticipating the moment his lips would touch hers. The moment when he would seal the promise between them. The future would be whatever they decided it would be. And in her future, he was going to be her friend and lover. And nothing was going to change that now.

A knock on the door prevented Clark's lips from touching hers. She gave him a frustrated smile.

"I probably should get this," she said, backing towards the door. "You know ... just in case it's someone I might actually want to talk ... Oh, hello," she said, cutting herself off when she opened the door and saw the strangely dressed little man standing on the other side. She knew him. Or at least, she'd seen him somewhere before. A few times, as a matter of fact — over the course of the past week. But, now that she thought about it, this was the first time she'd seen him when Char ... Clark was present.

"Oh, hello, Ms. Lane," he said, quickly removing his bowler hat. "I was looking for Mr ... Uhh, yes. There you are, my boy."

"Who are you?" Lois asked, suddenly having a bad feeling about this.

"I'm Herbert George Wells, Ms. Lane. And I've come here

looking for Mr. Kent.”

He stepped into the room without invitation. Lois' eyebrows went up, but, after looking briefly at the door, decided to close it.

“I've come to fetch you, my boy,” Wells said. “You have to come back to the future with me. Everything depends on it.”

PART FIVE

‘Til Death Do Us Part’

“Would you like to take a seat, Mr. Wells?” Lois said, trying to get some control over the situation.

“Herb, please,” Wells corrected. “And yes, thank you.”

Lois gestured to Clark, pointing to one of the two chairs in the small kitchenette. Clark ignored her.

“I'm not going back, Herb. I've made my decision, and nothing you can say or do will get me to change my mind,” Clark said. “Now ... if that's all you came for ...” He walked over the door and opened it, clearly inviting Wells to leave.

“Oh, dear. This really isn't going well at all,” Wells said.

“You think?” Lois almost said, but at the last minute, bit her tongue. Instead, her eyebrows rose at the idiocy of Wells' comment. Who was this man, anyway? “Wait a minute,” Lois said. “Did you say ... Herbert George Wells?”

Wells nodded.

“As in ... H.G. Wells, the author of The Time Machine?”

“One in the same,” Wells replied.

Lois raised her hands in the air in surrender. “Okay, wherever you are, you can come out now,” she said, glancing around the room. “I know I'm on Candid Camera.” She turned towards Clark. “That's what this is, right. The whole ... time travel, flying, other planet thing. This is just some elaborate Candid Camera set up. Okay, well, ha ha, you got me. It's over.”

Clark quickly closed the door again.

“Now see what you've done,” Clark said to Wells, before slowly approaching Lois.

“Don't touch me!” Lois said when he got near.

He held his hands towards her in a gesture of supplication. “Lois, there is no Candid Camera. No one has been playing you for a fool. And this really is H.G. Wells, author of The Time Machine. What most people don't know is that in addition to writing a book about time travel, he also invented a machine to travel through time.”

“Quite right,” Wells said. “And I've been ...”

A single look from Clark silenced him. When he was certain Wells wouldn't interrupt again, he turned back to Lois.

“I used the plans Wells accidentally left in my apartment to build the time machine you saw in my motel room. I wanted to come back to sav ... meet you. Everything that has happened between us this past week has been real.” He paused, reaching out to place his hand on her chin, tilting her head up so that he could be sure he had full eye contact before continuing. “Everything.”

Lois searched his eyes, looking for deception, but couldn't find any. It was the same open, slightly vulnerable look he'd given her from the beginning.

Not that he was telling her everything. She hadn't missed his almost slip when he said he'd come back to meet her. And suddenly, she thought she understood. Given his response when she'd commented that they must know each other in 1997, the pieces seemed to come together in her mind. The problem wasn't that they were enemies in 1997. The problem was that she didn't survive until 1997.

She let out a slow breath. Less than ten years. That was why he was back here.

Still, she turned her mind to the other man currently looking very uncomfortable standing near the door.

“So why are you still here?” Lois asked Wells. “He said he's not going back. And given his speed and strength, I really don't

see how you're going to force him.”

“Please,” Wells said, addressing Lois now. “Let me explain things. If in the end, I can't convince you that he needs to return ... Well, I guess I'll have no choice but to leave.”

Lois studied the strange little man for a moment before deciding that, regardless of what Clark decided to do, she was going to hear Wells out. “So then ... talk,” she said. Her abruptness was due more to the fear now rolling through her belly than any particular desire to be rude.

“It doesn't matter what he says,” Clark instantly informed her. “I'm not going.”

“Please, my boy. Just hear me out ... and let her hear me out before making any rash decisions.”

Clark let out a breath, as if realizing he'd lost the argument. “Fine,” he said in resignation.

“Okay, then,” Lois said. “Why don't you get Mr. Wells a chair?”

This time, Clark ceded to her request, picking up a kitchen chair and plopping it down none-too-gently next to Wells. Lois took a seat on the edge of the bed and looked up at Clark. He looked lost, as if not entirely certain what to do now. Her heart reached out to him. He wasn't looking forward to this talk any more than she was. Patting the bed next to her, she silently invited him to join her. When he sat down, she took his hand, holding it between both of hers, suspecting that she would need his support before this was all over.

“Okay, Mr. Wells ...”

“Herb please,” Wells said, interrupting her.

“Mr. Wells,” Lois repeated, a single raised eyebrow telling him that he'd better just state why he'd come as quickly and concisely as possible. After all, given what he wanted to do, Lois was not inclined to become his friend. “Why don't you start at the beginning?”

“I told Clark back in 1997 that we didn't know how a person going into the past and making changes would affect the future because no one had ever done it before. That is no longer the case. This past week you have been making changes to your past and each one ripples through time like a convulsion ...”

Lois' eyes widened at the use of the word ‘convulsion,’ but she said nothing.

“It tears through the fabric of time, changing what was once the past, in some cases drastically. I found you because I started searching for the source of one change in particular and discovered that it could be traced back to a truck that should have gone over the Hobbs River Bridge. It didn't, due to some flying mystery man rescuing it. From there, I just did a number of short jumps forward in time, watching Ms. Lane, knowing that eventually you would have contact with her. And here you are.”

“Look ... I don't care,” Clark said. “I'm here. I'm staying and there is nothing you can do about it.”

“If you do that, you will eventually tear the timeline ... your own past completely apart. If you were just an ordinary man, maybe you could get away with it. But you're not an ordinary man. And putting you together at this point in time with this anything but ordinary woman ...” Wells let out a breath as he marshaled his arguments. “When you saved that truck, you saved the life of a man who went on to ... Well, I don't know all the details, but what I do know is that he was upset about an editorial that appeared in the Daily Planet and he bought himself a high powered rifle and shot Perry White.”

“What?” Lois and Clark both gasped.

“Is Mr. White going to be okay?” Lois asked.

“I'm afraid I don't know. As I said, it takes time for a change in time to affect the present. As soon as I realized that Mr. White had been shot, I immediately dedicated myself to looking for that change so that I could find out where you were and bring you back. Last I know, Perry White was fighting for his life at

Metropolis General.”

“Clark?” Lois asked, turning fearful eyes on his.

Clark rose to his feet, obviously agitated. “None of that is my fault. You know why I have to stay,” he added, looking at Wells.

Wells rose to his feet as well. “My boy, none of the changes you’ve made to date have in any way changed ... certain outcomes.”

Lois’ eyes narrowed on the careful choice of words and she noted the way Clark’s eyes flicked momentarily to her.

“Then you know I can’t leave,” Clark said. “I can’t go back. I just can’t. There’s nothing there for me. Besides, if Perry has already been shot, it’s not as if my going back now will save him.”

“If you don’t go back, Perry White is not the only one who will be affected. He’s only the first. My boy, in time, the very fabric of your world could be in danger,” Wells said. “Your very existence could be in danger. You must have noticed some difference, had some indication that your past is changing.”

“The headaches,” Lois said immediately.

“They’re nothing,” Clark said dismissively.

“What headaches?” Wells asked.

“He gets these periodic headaches,” Lois said, ignoring Clark’s obvious desire that she remain silent. “His body convulses. And ... at least judging by the two I’ve seen, they’re getting worse.”

“His molecules are realigning themselves as the timeline adjusts itself. They would happen shortly after he did something that caused changes to the past. As the ripples of the past finally catch up to his own time, he would have to change to reflect those realities. It’s happening in the future, too. People don’t remember them, however, because after one has gone through, their memories are immediately readjusted to edit out the change. Your memories are not affected, I suspect, because you are in the past. But your body is still going through the changes that your world is experiencing.”

“The beard,” Lois said.

“What beard?” Wells asked.

“I forgot to shave this morning. Okay, so it grew a little bit faster than normal, but it was nothing.”

“After one of his convulsions, he suddenly had a beard. Is that connected?”

“I would imagine so. Something must have changed that caused him to decide to grow a beard in his own time and so his body when it realigned had a beard here, too.”

“Look, who cares?” Clark said. “I had a beard. Big deal. I shaved. It’s gone. End of discussion.”

“Don’t you understand, my boy?” Herb asked. “If your molecules are realigning themselves, then that is more than just a matter of shaving. It means that something is happening to your reality ... on a molecular level. In time ... your whole reality could cease to exist. And if that happens, you will cease to exist.”

“I don’t care!” Clark said. “I’m not leaving.” He glanced over at Lois before looking back at Wells. “I can’t. Don’t you understand that?”

“I understand that you want to sav ... I understand. But if you destroy yourself in the process, what’s the point?”

“The point is ...” He glanced at Lois, before quickly diverting his eyes. “You know what the point is,” he said instead.

Well’s opened his mouth to retort when Lois got there first.

“Mr. Wells, could Clark and I have some time to discuss this alone?”

Wells looked between Lois and Clark for a moment before nodding. “I’ll just be waiting ...” He gestured to the door.

“No, you don’t understand,” Lois said, stopping him as he began to move towards the door. “Twenty-four hours,” she said, glancing at her watch. “Come back here at noon tomorrow.”

“Ms. Lane, I don’t think ...”

“Noon tomorrow,” Lois repeated, stepping towards Wells so that Clark couldn’t see her face. “You’re not getting anywhere with Clark right now. Please ... noon tomorrow.”

He seemed to catch on to what Lois was telling him. Clark might not care about his own fate, but Lois most certainly did. He was getting nowhere. He had no choice but to trust her.

“Noon tomorrow,” he finally said. “Well, then ... I guess I’ll just have to leave this with the two of you — trust you to do the right thing.”

When H.G. Wells left, Lois walked over and picked up a paper bag sitting just inside the door and carried it into the kitchenette.

“What’s that?” Clark asked.

“The subs I picked up for lunch.”

“You want to eat lunch now?” Clark asked.

“Well, we could wait ‘til six, but then we’d have to call it supper,” Lois said, setting the bag on the table before turning her attention to the coffee maker.

“But ... aren’t we going to talk about ...”

“Not yet, Clark,” she immediately cut him off. “I just need ... to get some things straight in my mind. Please?”

He let out a breath before nodding.

“So ... Steak and cheese or vegetarian?” she asked, gesturing to the bag.

“Something tells me that’s a rhetorical question,” Clark answered, turning his attention to the bag while she began fixing coffee.

Clark would never have believed he could be awkward with Lois. But avoiding what was foremost on both of their minds was making conversation stilted and silences between comments seem to hang in the air between them. When he couldn’t stand it anymore, he finally spoke.

“I’m not going back, Lois,” he blurted out.

She raised her eyebrows momentarily but didn’t look up or in any other way acknowledge his comment.

“I promised I wouldn’t leave you. And I’m not going to go back on that.”

She finally looked up at him, the sadness in her eyes slicing through his heart. “I don’t think you have a choice.”

“Lois ...”

“No, Clark. Listen to me. What I saw this morning ... you on the floor ... It scared the hell out of me. Wells is right. You have to go back because being here is killing you.”

“Lois, you’re over reacting. It will pass. It’s just a ...”

“What?” she asked when he couldn’t find the words to complete his thoughts. “You convulse and suddenly ... Oh, look, I grew a beard. What’s next? A hand missing? An arm? Where does it stop? We can’t even fight against that.” Her final comment wasn’t much more than a whisper.

He quickly moved his chair closer to hers, taking her hands from where she was shredding a napkin, to hold them between his.

“I’m not leaving you, Lois. I can’t. You don’t understand.”

She looked at him, her eyes clear as she held his gaze as if in a vice. “Yes, I do.”

“No, you don’t understand. You don’t know what’s at stake here.”

“Are you referring to the fact that if you leave I won’t live to see my thirtieth birthday?” she asked.

“How ...”

She gave him a look as if to say that he should know better than even to ask that question.

“That was what you and Wells were so desperately trying not to say earlier, isn’t it?” she asked.

He couldn’t hold her eyes. He looked down. She slid one of

her hands out of his so that she could place it under his chin, bringing his face back up to hers.

"We don't know what's going to happen in the future," she said.

"Yes, we do. You heard Wells say that nothing I've done here has changed the fact that you die."

"What I heard Wells say is that he left the future when Perry White was shot. What I heard Wells say is that he came back here, looking for you after you rescued that truck. You've had headaches since then, Clark. That means you've made more changes ..."

"But ..."

"That means Wells doesn't know what's going to happen any more than you or I."

"I can't take that risk. I don't think I can go back to living without you."

"Then tell me everything. Tell me how I die. And trust me to survive it this time."

He looked at her, hope growing in his eyes. Then, just as quickly it went out. "No, Lois. That's not good enough. I won't take the chance. If I'm here ..."

"You'll likely die ... or simply vanish ... or however this works. And how would that help me survive?" She paused. "Clark, all I'm asking for is a chance to be with you. You going back to 1997 is the only way we will have that chance. Please. Give us that chance."

He looked down, knowing he had been beaten.

"Hey, don't look so sad," Lois said, her voice deliberately light. "We've still got ..." She glanced at the clock. "... almost twenty-three more hours before you have to leave. A lifetime, really."

He knew this was tearing her apart just as much as it was him, but he loved her for trying. "So what do you want to do?" he asked, forcing himself to match her tone "Since I can fly ... we can be anywhere in the world in minutes."

"Really?"

He nodded. "So ... where do you want to go? Anywhere in the world would work for me ... or we don't have to leave this room." He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Anything you want to do, that's what we'll do."

Her expression turned unexpectedly serious. "Anything?"

"Absolutely anything," he promised.

"Then I want to get married."

He stared at her in shock.

"Unless ... maybe you don't want to marry me. Maybe I misunderstood what we were talking about here." She quickly rose to her feet and began cleaning up their lunch things.

Married? Had she really just asked him to marry her?

She'd obviously misunderstood. She'd asked him to marry her and he hadn't said anything. She'd thought they were ... she didn't know. Maybe she'd misunderstood everything. But she'd been prepared to wait for ten years just for the chance to be with him. And he'd seemed like he was willing to die to protect her.

But maybe it was all part of the whole superhero package. Maybe he would be offering the same for anyone. And maybe last night had just been ... whatever. She had offered herself to him on a silver platter, after all. Maybe she was just taking this ... thing between them far more seriously than he was. Well, obviously that must be the case.

She grabbed her cold coffee and took it into the bathroom to dump it in the sink.

"Lois, Lois, Lois ..." Clark said, coming in behind her.

Ignoring him, she poured out her coffee and then tried to slip past him out of the bathroom.

His arms caught her, pulling her against him as she continued to struggle. The table still wasn't cleared. She really should be

thinking about doing a couple loads of laundry soon. And then there were those follow-up stories Perry wanted done. Maybe it wasn't too late for her to ...

Her thoughts trailed off when he took hold of her face between his hands and kissed her. Solidly. Passionately. Determinedly. She felt herself begin to melt against him as his hands released her face to pull her against him once again.

An eternity seemed to pass before the kiss slowly ended in a series of lighter kisses, as each kept moving back in, as if desperate for one last taste. Finally, Clark leaned his forehead against hers, closed his eyes and sighed.

"We need to talk," Clark said once he had regained his equilibrium. Kissing Lois was far too distracting. Still, he needed to know if she had meant what she'd said and why she had even said it. And most important of all, he needed to dissuade her without giving her reason to doubt his feelings. She was twenty, for crying out loud. And it would be six years before they even met. The last thing she needed was a paper marriage to be a mill stone around her neck. She was young. She should be out having fun, experiencing the world, playing the field. It would be completely irresponsible for him to marry her now.

When she nodded, he took her hand, leading her out of the bathroom so that they could sit together on the side of the bed.

"So ... was it my imagination or did you just ask me to marry you?" he asked.

She shrugged self-consciously. "Look, Clark, just forget I said anything. I just ..."

"Wait, wait, wait. I think we need to talk about this."

She didn't look at him. He let out a breath, reaching out to rest a hand against her cheek so that he could bring her face up to his. "What I want to know is why, Lois? Why do you want to marry me?"

"Isn't that what most people do when they're in love?"

"Lois, you're twenty years old. I'm thirty."

"When were you born?" she asked.

"1966."

"Well, then, technically, you're only a year older than I am."

"That's not the point."

"Then what is the point, Clark?"

"The point is that you're too young to even be thinking about marriage. The point is that you've got too much living to do before deciding who you want to marry, or even if you want to get married." He ran his hand through his hair. "I shouldn't have even slept with you last night. That wasn't fair to you."

"Because you're not sure what you want?" Lois asked.

"What? No! I know what I want."

"And that would be?"

"You. Always you, but ... Lois, you're twenty!"

She raised an eyebrow. "I know how old I am, Clark."

"Then how can you even want to do this?"

"I love you."

He let out a breath. "I love you, too, but ..."

"Clark, my mother married my father when she was twenty-one. She had me when she was twenty-two. My grandmother married my grandfather when she was eighteen. My great-grandmother ..."

"Okay, I get the point. But things are different now than they were when your mother married your dad. You have more options. You don't have to get married. You can be anything, do anything you want to be or do."

"Do you plan to stop me from being an investigative reporter?"

"Of course not, but ..."

"Then I don't see how marrying you restricts my options."

"Okay, then, assuming this plan of yours works and you do survive, it will be years before we can ever live together as

husband and wife. Why would you want to tie yourself down like that?"

"So ... it's not that you don't want to marry me?" she asked, searching his eyes now.

"Lois, there is nothing I want more than for you to be my wife. But it's not fair to you to ..."

"Do you really think there will be someone ... anyone else? That I'm interested in playing the field, always knowing that I'm doing nothing more than 'playing.' Clark, I already know who I'm waiting to meet. I'm not going to go out now and start playing the field. I never did before and whether or not we get married today or wait for another ten years, there won't be anyone else."

"Six years."

"But ... you said 1997?"

"I go to work for the Planet in 1993."

"1993? Do we ever ... meet?" Lois asked, momentarily distracted.

Clark shook his head. "You disappear on a trip to the Congo to investigate a gun running story shortly before I arrive at the Planet. April 1993. I got a job at the Planet in June."

She took a moment to ponder that before returning to her previous train of thought. "So ... only six years, then. If I do manage to survive. You really think I don't love you enough to wait for six years? Wait a minute? In the Bible ... wasn't there a story about someone working for six years because he ... or was that she ... wanted to marry someone?"

"Jacob ... And it was actually seven years. He worked for Laban for seven years because he wanted to marry his daughter, Rachel. But when the time came for him to claim his bride, her father married him to his other daughter, Leah, instead."

"Hold it! I thought he got to marry the one he loved?"

"He did. But he had to work for Laban for another seven years."

"So he worked for fourteen years to be with the woman he loved. And you think I have a problem with just waiting for six years? If Jacob could work for fourteen years to be with the woman he loved, waiting for six years for the man I love will be a walk in the park."

"But ..."

"Clark, I know you think I'm only twenty — what could I possibly know about love and life? But I've always known my own mind. I know what I want out of my life. I want to be an investigative reporter and ... I want to be your wife. My dad couldn't change my mind about the first decision and trust me, he tried, and nothing ..."

She made sure she had full eye contact before continuing. "... nothing will change my mind about the second.

"And if this doesn't work. If I don't ... survive, will you grieve my loss less if we don't get married? And if I don't survive ... I want to know ..."

She paused, as if marshaling her thoughts. "I want to know what it's like to marry the man I love."

Clark stared at her for a long moment, digesting her words. He already knew there had been no significant other in her life in 1993. And looking in her eyes and listening to her words, he knew that she would wait for him, regardless of how long it was. She was Lois Lane, after all. And everything he'd learned about her while searching for her this past year confirmed what she was telling him. She'd always known her own mind, what she wanted and how to go about getting it. And ... oh god, how he wanted to marry her.

"Well, then," he finally said. "Let's see if I can get this right." He got up off the side of the bed, dropping down on one knee in front of her. "Lois Lane, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

She didn't answer with words, but by the way she threw herself into his arms and captured his lips with her own, he got

the message.

Clark looked around in dismay. By the time they'd arrived in Vegas, obtained a license and made arrangements, there hadn't been much choice left in wedding chapels available at the last minute. Still, there must be something better than this.

"Number forty-one!" an exhausted looking man in an Elvis costume bellowed from a curtain covered doorway at the back of the building. "Number forty-one!"

Number forty-one ... Or at least that's who Clark assumed the young couple who rose to their feet must be ... joined him at the curtain and gave him their number.

"Well, don't dawdle," Elvis said. "I need you to sign here and here and here."

He got the appropriate signatures and then the three of them disappeared into the back.

"Let's get out of here," Clark said, turning to Lois.

"Why?" Lois asked.

"This can't possibly be how you dreamt your wedding would be," he said, gesturing around them.

"Marrying the man I love ... Nope, you're right. That was hardly my plan."

"Lois, you know what I mean."

"Clark, sit down," she said, tugging at his hand until he took a seat next to her. "Okay, if you had asked me when I was a little girl what my marriage would be like, I'd probably have told you that a horse-drawn carriage would take me to a large castle where my prince would be waiting. People would line the streets, cheering. And when the minister pronounced us husband and wife, thousands of white doves would be released and the Vienna Boys Choir would burst into song."

"See ... that's exactly what I'm talking about."

"But what I failed to take into account was that I would have undoubtedly stepped in horse dung when I got out of the carriage in front of the drafty castle; the people lining the streets would have turned into an angry mob; the doves would have left droppings on all my guests; my prince would likely have turned out to be the biggest crime lord in Metropolis and the police would have invaded my wedding with arrest papers, interrupting the Vienna Boys Choir anyway." She smiled. "I'm not getting wedded today," she said softly. "I'm getting married. To the man I love. To the strongest, gentlest, most caring man I've ever known. What could be more perfect than that?"

Clark's expression softened.

"Forty-two! Number forty-two!" Elvis bellowed from the back of the room.

Lois smiled as she rose to her feet. "So ... how about it number forty-two? Wanna get married?"

Clark rose to his feet before suddenly looking at her in dismay. "Lois, I forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"Rings! I forgot to get rings."

Lois smiled. "Forget about rings. I wouldn't be able to wear one now anyway ... Not without having a whole lot of unanswerable questions directed my way."

"But ..."

"You just be sure you have that ring waiting for me when I get to the future." She reached up, pulling his head down for a quick kiss.

Clark looked at her in disbelief. "Are you sure?"

"I've never been more certain of anything in my life."

"Forty-two!" Elvis bellowed again.

"Well, come on forty-two," Clark said, his face lighting up in a smile as he reached for her hand. "And don't dawdle. We've got a lot of papers to sign."

It had been the most perfect wedding Lois had ever attended,

she thought as she leaned her head against Clark's shoulder while he carried her over the threshold at the suite at the Marriott he had insisted they check into for the night. After all, he had argued, they were only going to get one wedding night.

I, Clark Kent, take thee, Lois Lane, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, forsaking all others, 'til death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge thee my troth.

Never had she heard sweeter words. And as she'd looked into his eyes and seen his love for her reflected back as he'd said those words, their surroundings had faded and her heart had swelled and she'd become that princess riding up to the castle in her horse-drawn carriage to marry her prince.

"Hey, that's a great smile," Clark said, as he set her on her feet.

"Yeah, well I was just thinking what a perfect wedding that was."

His own smile grew. "Yeah, it was pretty special wasn't it. So ... what do you want to do now?" He glanced around them. "Maybe we could see if they have some board games around here for us to ..."

He was suddenly spun around into her arms so that she could kiss him.

"Or ... we could do this," he said when the kiss finally broke. His eyes flicked down to her swollen lips. "Oh yeah," he said, his voice husky. "definitely this."

Lois giggled when he swept her up into his arms so that he could carry her to the bedroom.

Lois drew lazy patterns on Clark's chests as she lay cuddled in his arms. Their passion spent, they had settled into the comfortable world of after glow. She had to admit, she was exhausted. But she had no intention of sleeping. There would be plenty of time for sleep when he ... Her mind quickly shied away from that thought.

She still had so many questions. So many things she wanted to know. Where to start was the hard part.

"A penny for your thoughts," Clark said, leaning closer to plant a soft kiss on the tip of her nose.

"I guess there is one thing puzzling me," she said. She rolled onto her side, propping her head up with her hand so that she could look at him. He rolled on his side to face her.

"Shoot," he said, reaching out to brush a strand of hair behind her ear.

For a moment she was distracted by the feather-like touch. But she quickly gathered her thoughts. "You never met me before I died, right?"

"That's right."

"And yet you came back in time to save me. So ... why? Why me?"

Clark's expression turned to disbelief and then he was softly laughing.

"What?"

"It's just ... I can't believe I haven't even thought about her since I met you," he said in wonder.

"Her?" Lois asked cautiously, the warm glow of only a moment ago quickly evaporating.

"Now, don't get all prickly on me," Clark said, gently stroking her cheek. "It's not what you think. I don't have someone waiting for me back in 1997."

"Okay," she said, forcing herself to relax. After all, he was here with her, wasn't he? He had even married her. So whoever this other 'her' was, she couldn't be a threat, could she?

"H.G. Wells didn't only invent a time machine," Clark said, beginning his story. "His machine ... well, it can also be used to travel to other dimensions."

His voice had become serious, prompting a similar response in her — as if understanding that although he might not have someone waiting for him back in 1997, but he was still fearful of how she would react to this story. She could hear it in the slight tremble in his voice.

Automatically, she pulled the sheets tighter around her before turning her mind to what he had just said. Other dimensions? "What do you mean?" Lois asked.

"Other dimensions ... One dimension, in particular, running parallel to ours. Much like ours, but with differences."

"Like you see in science fiction movies?"

"I know how this sounds, but ... " He floated about a foot off the bed.

"Uhh ... okay," Lois said, unable to stop herself from running her hand above and below him, just to be sure that she wasn't seeing things. He may have flown her to Las Vegas, but still ... "Okay, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt," she said. "So ... what does this other dimension have to do with you coming to look for me?"

"The Lois from this other dimension came to this one. I met her. And then, later, I went to her universe briefly to help out with a problem there."

She was dead silent even as her heart rate jumped slightly. "Go on," she said cautiously after a long moment.

"She and Wells were brought to this universe by an evil time traveler named Tempus. When Tempus brought them here with no way home, they came to find me."

"Why?"

"Because she knew that I had extraordinary powers and they needed my help to get back to their own universe."

"Okay. I can understand that. Go to Superman to get help."

"I wasn't actually Superman then."

"You weren't?"

He shook his head. "She was the one who convinced me to put on the suit. She maintained that I could keep people from knowing that Clark was the one doing super things by having a secret identity."

Lois bit her lip as she digested that. "So ... without a second thought, suddenly you're flying around the skies just because she wanted you to?"

"I did it because it was what I wanted to do," Clark said.

"Lois, ever since I started developing these miraculous abilities, I've wanted to use them for some good. And it was killing me a little more every day that I couldn't help when I'd see people suffering. She only gave me a way to do it."

"And she knew this because ... that was what the Clark in her dimension did?"

He nodded.

"So then, why does everyone in your time know you're Superman?"

"The plan backfired. Tempus knew that I was the one with the powers and his plan involved exposing me to the world."

"You must have hated her."

"I didn't hate her. It wasn't her fault."

"Then ... What did you feel for her?"

He moved, so that he could look Lois in the eye. "I was attracted to her," he admitted. "And, yes, she was the reason I started searching for you. But she's not the reason I'm here."

"Then why are you here?"

"Lois, in searching for you, I got to know you. Not her. You. I talked to your parents and your sister. I talked to Perry and the people you knew at the Planet. I read your stories. I learned everything I could about you, trying to figure out what you might have done, or where you may have gone if you got in trouble in the Congo.

"Yes, I had feelings for her. But I knew her for ... a few days all together. Once when she came to my dimension. And once

when I went to help out in hers. But getting to know you from Perry and your family and your writing ... I didn't come into the past to find the other Lois. If that's what I had wanted, I could have used the time machine to travel to her dimension. Tried to persuade her to come back with me. Instead, I used the time machine to come back in time. I used it to find you."

"Would she have been ... receptive if you'd gone to her dimension?" she asked, instantly picking up on his 'tried to persuade her' comment.

"Probably not. In fact, she was the one who told me that she thought any feelings I had for her were meant for you. When I met you for the first time, I instantly knew just how right she was. What I felt for her was nothing more than ... a shadow of what I feel for you."

"Were you two ... " Her voice trailed off, finding herself unable to complete the dreaded question.

"Intimate?" he asked, continuing when she nodded in response. "No. Never. She kissed me once, when we first met. Nothing major, just a peck on the lips. I think ... she somehow mistook me for the other Clark for an instant. And then we almost kissed on two other occasions. But it never got any further than that."

Lois fell silent as she attempted to absorb what he'd told her. Just when she thought he'd heard it all, that it couldn't get any weirder, it just did. Time travel ... okay. Flying aliens ... maybe. Superheroes ... doubtful, but possible. Other dimensions with other versions of her visiting him, making him realize that he desperately wanted to meet her ... not a chance.

But, he looked sane enough. In fact ...

As she watched him crawl out of bed and walk across the room, she took the time to appreciate the view of that cute little tushy. Tight and hard, muscles rippling as he ... Her bottom lip came out in a pout when he picked up a hotel robe and slipped it on. Not fair. There ought to be a law against ...

"I'm just going to give room service a call and have them send up some supper while you digest all of that," he said, looking back at her in concern.

Digest all of what? The fact that there ought to be a law against covering up that delicious, mouth-watering ...

Oh, wait. That wasn't what she was supposed to be thinking about. "Uhh ... yeah. Good idea," she said with as much conviction as she could muster.

The concerned furrow between his eyebrows deepened.

She gave him a sheepish shrug. Hopefully, he would just think that she was ... digesting.

"Anything in particular you want?" he asked.

"Uhh ... surprise me," she responded.

He nodded and left the bedroom.

Surprise me. Had she really just said that? She wasn't entirely sure just how many more surprise-mes she had left in her.

She let out a slow breath. Alternate dimensions. Alternate versions of her. But wait ... When Captain Kirk swapped places with his doopelganger on Star Trek, wasn't his doppelganger evil? Did that mean this other Lois was evil? No, that couldn't be it. Not by the way Clark had talked about her. So ... maybe not all doppelgangers were evil. She supposed that made sense. After all, if there was one alternate dimension, there had to be many alternate dimensions. So if there were dimensions where she was evil, there had to be dimensions where she was good, too. Didn't there?

She gave her head a shake. Was she really using Star Trek as her primary research source to understand her current reality? If she wasn't careful, she was likely to start wondering if she and Clark were going to found a dynasty that would lead the world into some sort of utopian future. Right. Like that was ever going to happen!

Still, even if her doppelganger wasn't evil, she still wasn't

entirely sure how she should feel about any of this? Should she be angry — feel used as some sort of replacement for the woman he really loved. Should she feel flattered that he met another her and then came back in time to meet her ... or rather, save her? Or should she worry that he was really in love with this other her and ...

'I can't believe I haven't even thought about her since I met you.'

Warmth flooded through her heart as she recalled Clark's words, instantly cutting through all the other threatening emotions. He wasn't comparing them, trying to see if she lived up to what the other Lois was like. No, he hadn't even thought about the other Lois since he had met her. And the soft laughter and wonder in his voice when he'd vocalized those words made them impossible to disbelieve.

His words told her something else, too. He hadn't been deliberately keeping this information from her. He just hadn't thought about the other Lois. Not since they had first met. So could she really be angry with him for an oversight? Quite an oversight, to be sure. But an oversight, none-the-less.

No. Well, okay, yes. She knew she had a temper. And she knew she didn't forgive easily. But for some reason ... she didn't feel angry — strangely. Scared, maybe. Confused ... a little. But ...

Still, even if he had had feelings for this other her, even if that was what had prompted his search into the past, did it really matter? She'd had feelings for Paul ... Or at least she'd thought she did. Had honestly believed he was the one great love of her life. But she hadn't thought about Paul, even once, in a romantic way since Charlie ... Clark had come into her life. How was that any different from Clark and this other Lois?

Okay, so maybe it was a bit different. After all, she assumed she looked much like this other Lois. So how could she know she was the one he really wanted? That she wasn't some very strange rebound for him. That, at some point, he might not want her to be more like the other Lois had been?

But how well could he know what the other Lois was like? He'd spent a few days with the other Lois. Other than that, his time had been spent learning about the genuine article. He'd talked to the people who knew her and learned about her through her writing. And never once since they'd met had he given her the impression that he wanted her to be anyone other than who she was.

Yes, the other Lois may have peeked his interest. But she wasn't the one he'd gotten to know. She wasn't the one he'd fallen in love with. He hadn't even thought about the other Lois since he'd come into the past.

No. He loved her. She felt that love in every look, every touch, every kiss. She felt it in the fear that he was going to lose her she'd seen in his face when he'd left the room.

And suddenly she had her answer.

No matter what was in his past, she was his future — just as much as he was her future. The rest would work itself out.

"I've placed our order," Clark announced. He'd decided to order supper to give her time to think about everything he had told her. She needed that time. He understood that. Still, his heart was in his throat as he returned to the room.

He took a seat on the side of the bed, all the while watching Lois closely. How was she taking this latest revelation? He couldn't quite get a read on her. She'd listened to his confession intently, asking several questions for clarification. And he'd answered all of them as openly and honestly as he could.

Still, how would she react? It wasn't that he had deliberately kept this information from her. He quite simply hadn't thought about it.

"So ... " he said, hoping for some sort of reaction. If she was

angry, they had to get it out in the open and talk it through before he went back to the future. He couldn't ... he wouldn't leave her behind either angry or confused.

"So ..." she responded, reaching out to play with the lapels on his terrycloth robe, pushing them carefully back to reveal more of his chest. "... can you think of anything we might want to do while we wait for the food to arrive?"

The sultry look she gave him and the way a single finger made a trail down his chest was almost his undoing. He had to force himself to capture her hand before it moved even lower. "Lois, we should talk about what I just told you."

A small pout appeared on her lips.

"I just think ..." he began, ignoring the temptation to kiss that pout away.

"What's to talk about, Clark?" she said, cutting him off. "The way I figure it is that I owe this other me a lot. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be sitting here right now." A grin quirked the corner of her mouth as her eyes left his to run down what she could see of his bare chest. "And trust me when I say the view from here is fantastic. Wouldn't miss it for anything."

"Are you sure you're okay with this?"

She made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "Other versions of me visiting you from other dimensions ... Hey, after time travel and flying aliens ... piece of cake."

"Lois ..." he said, still not convinced by her dismissive attitude.

"Clark, listen to me. Okay, hearing about other dimensions and other versions of me ... Yeah, it was a bit of a shock. But you love me, right?"

He nodded.

"And she went home?"

He nodded again.

"I know you had feelings for her — otherwise you never would have looked for me. But never have I felt as if you wanted me to be anyone other than who I am."

"I don't."

"Good! Because I have enough problems being me. I don't know how to be anyone else. And I know you love me as me. So ... I had feelings for Paul before you arrived. And yet you've erased those feelings. So you had feelings for her ..."

"And you have most definitely erased those feelings," he said.

"So ... as long as you don't invent another time machine so you can start making trips to her dimension to visit her ... I think we're good."

Clark smiled. "And since that's not going to happen ... Besides, she's married now, too."

"Really?" Lois asked, sitting up a bit straighter. "Who did she marry?"

Clark simply raised his eyebrows.

Lois burst out laughing. "You're kidding! She married her Clark?"

Clark nodded.

"Well, then, I guess that just confirms it. You and I are meant to be together ... in every dimension."

Unable to argue with that logic, he leaned in to kiss her only to be interrupted by a knock on the door. With a groan, he pulled back, once again straightening his robe and heading for the door, this time with a much lighter heart.

June 1997

'Oh my,' Wells thought, looking at the carnage around him. 'This is not good — not good at all.'

November 1987

Lois curled up on the end of the plush sofa, legs beneath her, almost lost beneath the folds of the hotel's complementary

terrycloth bathrobe. She watched, taking in every movement, every detail, every line of Clark's body, committing it to memory for the lonely years ahead. She didn't regret her decision to marry him. Not at all. It wasn't as if she would have dated anyone else anyway. Not when she knew there was no future in it. But, god, she would miss him when he was gone.

He turned to look at her and she quickly pushed those thoughts from her mind. There would be more than enough time to miss him when he was actually gone.

"Tell me something, Clark," she said, breaking the comfortable silence between them.

"What?" he responded, putting down his champagne glass and scooting closer to her on the couch. Expropriating her feet, he moved them into his lap.

She smiled, distracted momentarily as he began massaging them.

"You wanted to ask me something," he reminded her, bringing her mind back to the present.

"Right. Well, according to Wells, your headaches happen after you've done something to change the future ... or, well, in your case, the past."

"Right."

"So ... when have you had headaches?"

He smiled. "Good question. Okay, well, let me think ... I didn't have a headache when I went into the past to try to stop you from getting on a plane to the Congo in 1993."

"When I die?"

Clark nodded, a brief look of pain crossing his face. "Or at least ... disappeared. You were working on a gun running story and you boarded a plane to the Congo in 1993. No one ever heard from you again. I searched and searched, but ... nothing. I don't think you even made it to the Congo."

"Did you ever look into who was behind the gun running? They would be the most likely suspects to know what happened."

Clark nodded. "I did. But the trail had gone cold by the time I started investigating."

She nodded, disappointed. That would have been helpful to know. "So ... in spite of your warnings, I still got on that plane," she said. "I mean ... when you first went back in time to try to stop me."

He nodded.

"Okay, so that's obviously why you didn't get a headache — your actions didn't change anything."

Clark nodded. "Okay, so then my next attempt to find you ... I accidentally ended up jumping back to 1976 — when you were nine — and rescued you from that tree. It was after that I had my first headache."

"So ... maybe you saved me from dying when I fell from that tree?"

Clark shook his head. "I don't think that's it. After all, if I had never come back, you would have survived until 1993 so I didn't save your life — a few cuts and bruises maybe, but you would have been fine."

"Well, then, thank you for saving me from a few cuts and bruises. But that still doesn't explain your headache. Wait ... unless ..."

"What?"

"When I fell, I snapped a picture of you catching me. That was what helped me remember you when you showed up last week. So what if this time when you came back to warn me, I recognized you and it changed something?"

"But Wells said that nothing I did ... at least until the truck incident ... managed to save you."

"True. And I have to admit that I didn't recognize you immediately when you showed up here. So what if ... Maybe I still went to the Congo but then I remembered who you were ... my guardian angel ... and I did something as a result. Maybe I

was more cautious. Maybe it gave me a bit of a jump on my killer and he ended up ... I don't know, getting killed, too, or something."

Clark nodded slowly. "Okay, so that might have changed things. Someone dying in 1993 who should have lived."

She nodded. "Probably something like that anyway. So when was your next headache?"

"Uhh ... after I told you about date rape drugs."

"Not after you saved me at the party the day before?"

"No. Why?"

She let out a breath of relief.

"What?"

"Then chances are I wouldn't have been raped at the party, even if you hadn't come along — because I would suspect being raped would have changed me a lot. It certainly would have changed my attitude in the future, made me more jaded, less open." She shrugged. "At least, I suspect it would have. Would probably have seriously changed the way I approached stories. One would think that would have caused some changes to the future."

Clark cocked his head to the side and studied her for a moment. "That is important to you, isn't it? That you wouldn't have been raped, even if I hadn't shown up when I did."

She nodded.

"Why? I mean, I know why it's important to you that you didn't get raped, but since you didn't ... Why is it important to know that you wouldn't have been raped if I hadn't come along?"

She shrugged. "I guess it's just good to know that I still would have gotten out of it. That either someone else would have stepped in or that I was still cognizant enough to fight back, at least enough to make those jerks think I wasn't worth it. Or, even that Cat was right and they hadn't really intended to rape me when they took me out of that party — just humiliate me in some way."

"I can see that being important to you," Clark said reflectively.

"Of course, you may just not have had a headache because it had no direct bearing on anything in the future."

Clark shook his head. "I disagree. Even if it hadn't affected you, it would have had to change something in the men who hurt you — changed their attitudes and their relationships. Besides, in the future, you will become the investigative reporter you hope to be. If you had been hurt that way, it would have had an effect on how you approached stories. Besides, if something like that had happened to you ... I think I would have heard about it."

"My very own Lois Lane expert," she said, obviously getting a kick out of that fact.

He shrugged sheepishly. "You know why I did it. I just wanted to try to figure out where you might have gone if you got in trouble in the Congo."

"Uh huh," she responded. "Not that you had already fallen in love with me or anything?"

He chuckled. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? Me in some sloppy robe, crying into a tub of rocky road ice cream while mooning over your picture."

She sat up straighter. "Did you?" she asked, suddenly very curious.

"Wouldn't you like to know," he said.

"I think you did," she said smugly.

"You do, do you? Well, I guess you'll just have to think whatever you want." He leaned over, giving her a brief kiss. "Anyway, my point, before I was so rudely interrupted, was that given the research I did on you ... " He ignored the amused grin that once again crinkled around her eyes. "... I think I would have gotten a hint if something that bad had happened to you, but I didn't. So ...

"Wait a minute!" he said, cutting himself off. "I remember ...

I was talking to Lucy and she mentioned something about an incident that happened to you in university."

"What?" Lois asked, her heart instantly pounding painfully.

"No ... It's not that. Not that you were raped. But ... she didn't know the details, but she mentioned something about you getting drunk one night in your first semester of university and waking up in the morning with your hair cut really short ... and, according to her, really badly. You had to go out the next day and get it evened up. She said it ended up being really short."

"So you think ... "

Clark nodded. "It makes sense, doesn't it? Cat must have been right. The football players who took you out of that party probably never had any intention of raping you."

"They just wanted to teach me a lesson. So Lucy didn't know who had done this? Did she say anything about football players?"

Clark shook his head. "From what she said I got the impression you thought you must have done it yourself. That you never were able to figure out what had possessed you to try to cut your hair while you were drunk. But it's got to be connected."

Lois nodded. "Well, that's a relief at least. I mean, not I'd be thrilled with having my hair cut really short. But I can live with that. At least, it's a whole lot better than the alternative. And it makes me feel a bit more comfortable about the fact that nothing happened to the football players who took me out of that party." She let out a breath. "Okay, so ... you said your next headache was after you told me about date rape drugs."

"Now this one I think I may have already figured out. Like I said, I read everything you ever wrote and ... Lois, originally you didn't write a story about date rape drugs or solving Angelina's murder or Stafford's arrest ... none of that."

"But how ... " Her expression suddenly cleared. "I was about to write off everything that happened on Friday evening at the party as just having too much to drink until you made that comment about date rape drugs. So when you mentioned them ... "

"I changed the past by getting you started investigating something that you wouldn't have even considered if not for me and my slip about date rape drugs."

"I'm not sorry about that."

"Me either. But I couldn't believe, when I heard you and Molly talking, that neither of you had even considered that something like GHB might have been slipped in your drink. It wasn't until after I suggested it that it occurred to me that the problem hadn't been ... well, a problem in 1987."

"It is obviously a problem in 1987. It was just that no one had ever figured it out before," she said, correcting him.

"And I know of at least one way that affected the future," Clark said. "Well, other than alerting women to the danger out there a little sooner — which, hopefully, saved a lot of women from becoming victims to it between 1987 and the mid-nineties when it was originally first reported as a problem."

"What other effect do you think it had?"

"Bob Stafford ... When I came to the past, Robert Stafford was a science advisor to the Governor of New Troy. And a main critic of Superman. He was trying to convince the world to put a moratorium on Superman's activities, and in the process causing me a lot of grief."

"So by putting Stafford behind bars, you think I probably made Superman's life a little easier?"

Clark nodded. "Given that he's probably going to be serving a life sentence with no possibility of parole ... if not something worse, I'm pretty confident in saying that he's not the science advisor to the Governor of New Troy anymore. And I doubt anyone is the least bit interested in his opinion of Superman."

"Well, that's what husbands and wives do. Try to make things a little easier for each other."

"Then you're doing a fantastic job as a wife."

"That's good. 'Cause it's my first time, you know. I want to be sure I'm doing it right."

"Trust me," Clark said, his voice coming out as a husky growl. "You're doing a lot of things right in the 'wife' department."

She smiled, even as she gave him a smack when he tried to move closer. "Don't distract me," she said. "I want to figure out what other changes you've made."

He sighed and moved back to his own side of the couch, but couldn't quite resist raising one of her feet so that he could give her toe a light nip causing her to giggle.

But she still refused to be distracted.

"Okay, so when was your next headache?"

"Uhh ... after I saved that truck."

"And we already know what happens because of that."

"Yeah, Perry gets shot." His voice and expression darkened.

"Hey," she said, reaching over to touch his arm. "That wasn't your fault."

"No? If I hadn't saved that truck ..."

"Saving the truck was the right thing to do. It just had the wrong outcome. Or ... in 1997, does Superman only save the good people? Does he make moral judgments about who should live or die before coming to their rescue?"

"No, of course not."

"So if you go back to 1997 and people are about to die, are you going to insist on jumping forward in time so that you can make sure none of them do something you don't approve of before you decide whether or not to rescue them?"

"No," Clark said, finally letting her point sink in.

"Good. Because I don't like the idea of being married to a man who thinks he has the right to decide if someone is good enough to live."

"You aren't, Lois." He sighed. "I just hope Perry is okay."

"So do I," she conceded. "But from what I've seen, he's a tough old bird."

"Yes, he is."

"He'll make it, Clark. And after you leave ... maybe there's something I can do to prevent him from being shot in the first place."

Clark sat up a bit straighter. "You're right. Just as long as it's not stepping in front of the bullet."

"Don't worry. I promised you I'd survive until we meet. And I'm going to. Nothing is going to stop me from really being your wife."

"You really are my wife," Clark said.

"You know what I mean," Lois said.

"Yes, I do. And I'm going to hold you to that promise."

She nodded, realizing she'd never given a more important promise.

"Okay, so where were we?" Lois asked.

"Hey, I just realized something," Clark said.

"What?"

"Well, you made that comment about when we meet ... When I first meet you, I won't know that we're married, because I should meet you in 1993 when I first come to work at the Daily Planet and yet I don't come back to marry you until 1997. So the me from 1993 won't have even met you yet."

"Huh," Lois said, a smile growing on her face.

"What?" Clark asked cautiously.

"Nothing ... yet."

"And that means ..."

"Just that I've got six years to think of a way to have some fun with that. Have you ever wanted to have an affair with a married woman?"

"Huh?"

"Think about it, Clark. I'll be married to you, but you won't be married to me. You don't marry me until 1997. I marry you in

1987. That means 1993 Clark won't be married to me. So ... have you ever wanted to have an affair with a married woman?"

Clark chuckled.

"Never really thought of myself as the cheating type before," Lois said. "But trying to keep my hands off that gorgeous body of yours for four years ... I don't think that's happening."

"Well, if you only cheat on me ... with me ... I guess I can live with that."

"Maybe we should have taken the minister up on his suggestion of writing our own vows," Lois said. "How does that last line go again?"

"And thereto I pledge thee my troth?"

"Right. I should have said 'and thereto I pledge thee my troth unless I decide to cheat with you.'"

"Well, to keep the language right, it should probably be 'and thereto I pledge thee my troth unless I decide to cheat with thee.'"

Lois giggled.

"But I should warn you about something," Clark said, suddenly much more serious.

"What's that?"

"Well ... when I first came to the Daily Planet, I was engaged."

Her eyebrows rose. "So ... I'm going to have some competition. Did you marry her?"

"No — she broke up with me when the other Lois came to this dimension. By the way I reacted to the other Lois, I think Lana knew that I didn't love her the way a man should love the woman he was marrying. And what I felt for the other Lois doesn't even compare to what I felt the first moment I laid eyes on you. Besides, she didn't want me to be Superman. Had serious problems, in fact, with my Kryptonian heritage and made sure I knew it every chance she got. And I get the impression you're not bothered at all by those things."

"Bothered that my husband can fly me anywhere in the world in minutes? Nope. Don't see that as a problem at all."

"Then trust me when I say ... you have no competition."

Lois grinned. "Well, I won't after I find a place to bury the body."

"So ... you're okay with this? I mean, it's not every woman who has to deal with her husband being engaged to another woman."

"I'm not every woman. I'm the time traveler's wife. I'll just be sure to drop my towel at the first possible opportunity."

"She won't stand a chance."

"Seriously, Clark. I knew we'd have some challenges to work through when I asked you to marry me. So don't worry. We'll work it out."

Clark smiled. "Have I said how much I love you?"

"I think you've mentioned it," Lois responded. "But I don't mind hearing it again."

"Well, I do love you. Completely, utterly, eternally."

Releasing her feet, he moved closer, seizing her lips with his.

She indulged him for a moment before, again, pushing him away. "Okay, enough of that. Quit trying to distract me," she said playfully. "We were talking about when you had your headaches."

"Oh right." He thought back. "I think we got as far as the headache after the truck rescue."

Lois nodded, putting her feet back in his lap with a gesture that he was to continue with his massage. "So when was your next headache?"

"After you got your story about date rape drugs published in the Daily Planet," he said, giving in to her unspoken demand.

"And ... after our first kiss."

"So which thing provoked the headache?" Lois asked. "Hey, Clark! That might be it. That kiss might have been the thing that

kept me from going to the Congo.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, if I recognized you when you warned me not to go to the Congo, maybe I listened and didn’t go.”

“Of course, the headache could just have been because of the change to the world in general since you made them aware of a new risk to their safety.”

“True,” Lois conceded. “After all, you were the one who suggested I go to see Perry White when Paul wouldn’t print my story. Otherwise, it would probably have been nothing more than a bunch of posters stapled to telephone poles and likely destroyed with time.”

Lois’ eyebrows furrowed, then her eyes widened as an idea began to form. “Clark, tell me again how exactly you tried to stop me from going to the Congo?”

“I met you at the airport and warned you not to go. I tried to tell you that if you went, you wouldn’t be coming back.”

Lois smiled. “Clark, I promise you that I didn’t ... or won’t go to the Congo.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because your last headache happened after we made love. That has got to be because I recognized you when you approached me at the airport and by that point, I knew you were traveling in time. And I knew you were my guardian angel. I both loved and trusted you. If you had warned me not to go to the Congo ... told me if I went, I wouldn’t be coming back ... I promise ... I would have believed you.”

“So ... you survive!” Clark said, suddenly understanding.

“I survive!”

She suddenly found herself lost in Clark’s arms.

“We did it,” Clark exclaimed. “We really did, didn’t we?”

“I’d say so. Although ... I think it’s more a case of you doing it.”

“Us,” Clark repeated. “You took the huge step of trusting me — when you could have written me off as crazy any number of times.”

“Okay ... we did it.”

“So ... six years?”

“Six years. And then ... happily ever after.”

He frowned, seeming to mull that over in his mind. “Happily ever after? I don’t know. That’s a pretty tall order. Would you settle for ... weekly trips to The Fudge Castle?” He tried to make the offer sound as tempting as possible.

She considered that for a moment. “Nope,” she finally said. “I want happily ever after. After all, happily ever after at the very least has got to include weekly trips to The Fudge Castle.”

Clark laughed. “Okay, then. Happily ever after, it is. Now ... are we done talking? ‘Cause this is my wedding night you know.”

“Got something else you’d rather be doing?”

She giggled when he pounced.

Lois buried her face in Clark’s neck, breathing in his scent, making it a part of her. During their flight to Las Vegas, she’d been looking everywhere, taking in everything. Now all she wanted to take in was Clark.

She was going to lose him — and it was breaking her heart. Six years seemed like a lifetime. That was assuming that they were even right about her chances of survival. But either way, he would live and that was what mattered.

But that didn’t stop her from wanting to beg him not to go, or to take her with him. But either way, she would endanger his life and she couldn’t do that. If he didn’t go, he would continue to make changes to the past that would probably eventually destroy the time line ... probably resulting in his death. If she went with him ... if she didn’t do whatever she did in the next number of years ... that would change his past, too. And if her printing a story that wasn’t originally published hurt him, how much more

hurt would he be if she didn’t publish any more stories? Still, that didn’t keep the knowledge that she was losing him from killing her inside.

Even now, Wells was probably standing outside the door of her room, waiting for them.

Clark blew open the window to her dorm room.

“Hold on,” he said. “I’m going to have to go in fast.”

A second later, he was setting her down in the middle of her room.

The dreaded knock on the door came almost immediately. Lois bit her lip as she watched Clark walk over and open it.

“Oh, good. You’re here,” Wells said in a voice chipper enough to make Lois almost hate the man. “I trust that now that you’ve discussed it, you agree that Clark must come with me back to the future.”

“We agree,” Clark said.

“Good, good. Just one question before we go. Where did you put the other time machine?”

“Uhh ... It’s at the bottom of the ocean,” Clark said, giving a small shrug.

“Oh, well ... Okay, then,” Wells responded. “If you just want to collect your things ... ” He began twisting dials on his machine.

“What’s that?” Clark asked. “Where’s the time machine?”

“Oh, right. You haven’t seen this yet. I got it from the future. Much more efficient than the machine I built, don’t you think? Does everything my time machine does. Even has a few extra features.”

“That’s the time machine?”

“Quite so, and if you will just get your things, my boy, and come stand next to me, I’ll open the door to the future.”

“Wait!” Lois said, feeling that this whole thing was moving too fast. “At least give us a chance to say goodbye.” Her voice broke on the words.

Clark was there almost instantly, taking her in his arms as she cried softly against him, unable now to keep up her brave front. Because that’s all it was — a brave front. Inside, she felt as brittle as glass, as if a strong wind was all it would take to shatter her completely.

“Six years,” he said, taking her face in her hands and kissing her thoroughly.

“Six years,” she promised in return.

“Promise me you won’t go to the Congo.”

“I promise,” she said, her breathing unsteady now.

His thumbs gently brushed away the tears on her cheeks.

“I’ll be waiting,” he said.

Unable to speak anymore due to the large lump in her throat, she merely reached up, pulling his head down for one final kiss. It was sad. It was desperate. It was passionate. It said all the things that she couldn’t find the words to express. And all too soon it was over.

“I love you, Lois Lane Kent,” Clark breathed into her ear.

“I love you, Clark Charlie Kent,” she breathed back.

He stepped back, releasing her slowly, his eyes never leaving hers. Finally, only their hands were touching. She could tell that a window of some sort had opened, but she didn’t take her eyes off Clark. Then, contact was broken as he released her hands to pick up his bags.

“I love you,” he mouthed to her one final time before turning towards the window to follow Wells through.

“I love you, too,” she finally managed to get out just as the window closed behind him. Her knees giving out, she fell to the floor, her heart broken. It felt as if a part of her had suddenly been ripped away, leaving a giant hole inside her.

June 1997

“Where are we?” Clark asked, looking around at the beach and palm trees.

"Uhh ... yes. Well, we are on a small island in the South Pacific."

"Why?" Clark asked cautiously. "No ... wait. When are we?"

"June ... 1997. Just a few hours after you left."

"Then why haven't my memories changed? You said I made changes to the past. Surely when I came back here, I should have had the new memories. How does this work, anyway? Will I spend the rest of my life not knowing what happened during the past ten years?"

When Herb opened his mouth to respond, Clark rushed to continue. "No wait. None of that matters. I only need to know one thing. Did Lois survive?"

"Please, my boy. I know you have questions. And I'll answer all of them — I promise. As for your memory not having changed ... it will. It will probably take some time for the new history to become part of your consciousness. In the meantime, there is something I need to do. I'd ask you to wait here until I get back."

As he spoke, Wells began playing with his time machine.

"Wait!" Clark said, grabbing onto Well's arm. "At least tell me if Lois survived?"

"I will tell you everything. But, please, there is something I must take care of first. And as I said, it is essential that you wait for me here."

"Why?"

"Please. I'll explain momentarily."

Without waiting for a further response, Wells opened a door in time and stepped through, leaving Clark standing alone on the deserted beach.

Reaching into the inside pocket in his leather jacket, Clark pulled out a piece of paper. The most important piece of paper he had ever possessed. His marriage licence to Lois Lane.

"Survive, honey," he whispered to the document. "I can't live without you."

November 1987

The tears hadn't dried; Lois had simply run out of them. Forcing herself to her feet, she stepped over to her bed, intending to curl up on it, hoping sleep might relieve some of the pain. Besides, she was exhausted. She hadn't got any sleep last night.

In spite of her current circumstances, she found herself smiling at the memory of exactly why she hadn't got any sleep. Every inch of her body was sore, but she wouldn't have missed a minute of it for anything.

She sat down on the side of the bed. It wasn't until then that she first noticed it. A soft faded blue t-shirt with KU in red letters on the upper left corner almost invisible from repeated washings. Underneath, equally faded, was 'University of Kansas.' The t-shirt she'd worn after they'd first made love. She raised it to her nose, needing one last smell of its previous owner.

She'd seen him put this with his stuff when they had gone to get his things from The Cozy Motel before their trip to Vegas the previous day. His leaving it here hadn't been an oversight. It had to have been deliberate, probably left here even before they'd gone to get married.

Suddenly, the room was too claustrophobic for her. Dropping the t-shirt on her bed, she grabbed her phone and dialed a familiar number.

"Molly?" she asked when the phone was answered.

"Lois? What's wrong?" Molly asked immediately.

Lois quickly bit back a sob.

"Where are you?" Molly asked.

"In my room at the dorm."

"I'll be right there."

"No. No. I need to get out of here," Lois said.

"Are you okay?"

"No, I'm really not."

"Do you need me to call the police?"

"No, it's not ... I just need my best friend."

"I'll come pick you up."

Lois smiled through the tears she hadn't realized she had left. "Just have the hot chocolate waiting," she responded.

"It'll be hot and loaded with chocolate when you get here, sweetie," Molly responded. "Just get your butt over here pronto or I'm going to have to come fetch you. And trust me, if I have to hunt you down, it will not be pretty."

Lois knew that her laugh was watery, but, boy, did it feel good to laugh.

She probably shouldn't have told Molly all that. She certainly hadn't meant to. But in spite of her best intentions, the story had just come pouring out — everything from time travel to alternate dimensions to flying aliens. Or sort of ... she was pretty sure a lot of it hadn't made a lot of sense. It had been pretty disjointed, after all.

Besides, other than the time travel and alternate dimensions, Clark had told her that everyone in the future knew that Clark Kent was Superman.

And Molly was her best friend. If she couldn't trust Molly, who could she trust? Over the next few weeks, even months, she knew she would need someone's shoulder to cry on and Molly certainly fit that bill. So telling her everything was the only practical thing to do. Now if only Molly would ...

"Quit looking at me as if I'm crazy," Lois said, staring into her cup of hot chocolate.

"You're married?" Molly repeated.

Lois couldn't help but roll her eyes. Of all the things she'd told Molly, that was what Molly kept coming back to. Nothing seemed to have phased the other woman nearly as much as ...

"You eloped?" Molly said. "With Char. Clark?"

"Well, it seemed better to do it with someone than to do it by myself," Lois said, hoping to snap Molly out of her obsession.

"Oh ... what ... oh, of course," Molly said.

"I was joking, Mol."

"Huh ... Oh, right. So ... you got married, huh? Wow! I mean, that's a big decision, is all. It's not like getting a puppy."

"Oy!"

Wells stood in front of room 213 and raised his hand. He'd set the time machine to bring him back a little later, hoping that Lois had worked through the worst of her grief and would be willing to hear him out. Everything depended on it, after all.

He knocked, waited a moment and then knocked again.

"Ms. Lane," he called through the closed door.

"She's not there," a young woman said from behind him.

He turned to see a blonde standing in the doorway to two ten.

"I see. Would you be able to tell me where she went?" he asked.

The woman shrugged before stepping into her room and closing the door.

Oh, dear. It hadn't occurred to him that she might not stay in her room. Now what did he do? He couldn't put this off any longer, after all. No. This would not do at all.

Well, once when he'd seen Lois, she'd been coming out of the Alpha Nu Rho house with a friend. Maybe he should check there.

"Okay, so let me get this straight," Molly said, finally seeming to have recovered from the shock over Lois eloping.

"This guy marries you and then takes off back to the future."

"It wasn't like that. I knew he was leaving."

"And he still asked you to marry him?"

"Actually, I asked him."

Molly's eyebrows rose. "You knew ... and you still asked him to marry you knowing that as soon as he did, he'd be leaving

you?"

Lois cringed. "I guess when you put it like that, it does sound a little crazy."

"A little?"

"Molly, I love him. It's only six years. Women have waited longer than that for soldiers to come home from war."

"Yeah, but in those cases, there is a danger that one of them is going to die and so they want to marry — sort of an affirmation of life, I guess."

Lois immediately looked down.

"Omgod," Molly gasped. "That's it, isn't it? But ... if you're supposed to meet him in six years he must survive ... It's you, isn't it? You're the one who's in danger of dying."

"No. No ... I'm not. We think the changes we made to the past have solved that little problem. And now that I know what to avoid ..."

"Little problem?"

"You know what I mean."

"I'm not sure I do. Maybe ... Look, I've got a feeling here that we're going at this backwards," Molly said. "Why don't you start at the beginning?"

Lois took a sip of her hot chocolate before nodding. "Okay, well it all started when I was nine," she began.

She had just finished telling Molly her tale when a knock at the study door and Tracy sticking her head through the doorway interrupted them.

"There's this strange little man here asking to speak to Lois. He won't give his name. Says you'll know who he is."

"Would you mind sending him in?" Lois asked, rising to her feet. She could only think of one man who fit that description. But why would he be here? Had something happened to Clark on the return trip? She forced herself to keep calm. Maybe he'd just stopped by to make sure she was okay — after everything.

Please, please, please, let her have misjudged him. Let him just be concerned about her.

"Sure. No problem," Tracy said, stepping back into the hall.

"Ms. Lane," Wells said, appearing in the doorway a moment later.

"Is Clark okay?" Lois asked immediately.

"Uhh ... yes ... well ... about that ... " He glanced around at the two other women in the room.

Taking the hint, Tracy quickly excused herself.

"She knows, Mr. Wells," Lois said, gesturing to Molly. "Is Clark okay?"

"He is ... at the moment. But he won't be for long unless you help him."

"What do you need me to do?" Lois asked.

"Forget you ever met him."

Lois stared at Wells in stunned silence.

"And just exactly how is she supposed to do that?" Molly asked.

"Uhh ... yes ... well, I have a machine here that will alter your memories. Essentially, it will take specific memories ... in this case all memories of Clark ... and remove them from your mind." He set down a large, black bag on the table and opened it, removing a large metallic cylinder and something that resembled a football helmet's inner skeleton with wires.

"Just ... you mean ..." Lois began as it sank in what the machine was for. "You mean, you want me to 'literally' forget Clark. This isn't just a figure of speech?"

"Obviously not," he said, while working on connecting a number of wires to the metallic cylinder. "I know you could never forget Clark on your own. This machine will help with that. It's based on a machine your folks will eventually invent. The Bummer-Be-Gone. Originally, it was invented to remove bad memories. But future scientists were able to refine it so that it can be set to target very specific memories, removing them while

leaving all the memories surrounding them in tact."

"What?" both Molly and Lois gasped.

"Is she the only other one who knows any of the details about Clark or the future?" Wells asked.

"Yes, but ..." Lois said.

"Fine. Fine. Then if you will both just have a seat here ... I have a second head device and since we will be erasing memories of Clark for both of you, I'll be able to erase both your memories at the same time. Well, I'll erase your memories of me, too, since it wouldn't do for you to remember me either."

"Uh uh," Lois said.

"No way," Molly echoed.

"Oh dear," Wells said, finally cluing into the fact that they weren't exactly with him on this. "Perhaps I should start from the beginning."

"You think?" Lois said.

"I should begin by telling you that you and Clark did manage to change the past ... Or I guess, in your case, the future."

"We did?"

Wells nodded. "I traced the change and it happened following your first kiss. After that, I suppose it was impossible for you not to recognize him when he approached you at the airport before you boarded your fateful flight to the Congo. You never got on that plane. The culprits who were after you did make an attempt on your life here in Metropolis, but you were on your own turf and easily managed to avoid your fate."

"Who?" Lois asked.

"Excuse me?" Wells asked in response.

"Who were they? The people who killed me. Or will try to kill me or ... Or whatever."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I never thought to enquire about that."

"Of course not," Lois said. "Why would that little detail be important?"

"Precisely," Wells said, obviously not picking up on Lois' sarcasm.

Lois and Molly shared a look.

"So ... isn't this good news?" Molly asked.

"Oh no!" Wells said. "It ends up destroying everything."

"Uhh ... maybe you should explain," Lois said cautiously.

"Paradoxes," Wells said. "Are you aware of what those are?"

"A paradox is a seemingly contradictory statement that turns out to be true," Molly said.

"I guess I meant paradoxes within the context of time travel. Basically what it is ... Perhaps it would be best to explain by example. The most common example of a paradox is that a man goes back in time and kills his grandfather. If he kills his grandfather, how would he ever be born? And if he was never born, how could he go back in time and kill his grandfather?"

"Okay, but what does that have to do with this? Clark didn't kill anyone."

"Until now the idea of paradoxes in time travel has only been hypothetical. Not anymore. When you and Clark kissed, it marked a turning point in your relationship. You trusted him. So when he approached you at the airport, you believed him and didn't get on the airplane. As a result, you survive, you and Clark meet when he comes to work for the Daily Planet. You fall in love and get married. You even help him to create Superman."

"So far I'm not seeing the problem."

"The problem is that as a result, Tempus ... the man who originally brought the alternate Lois and me to this dimension, chose to take us to a different one. One that didn't have a Lois Lane or a Superman since those were critical elements in his diabolical plan to take over the world."

"So ..."

"Ms. Lane, it is because of that adventure that I even became aware of this dimension. I got to know and respect this dimension's Clark Kent and, eventually, began trying to help him

locate you. As a result, I ended up leaving my plans for the time machine in Clark's apartment. Without those plans, Clark could never have come back in time."

"And if he had never come back in time, he wouldn't have been able to warn me not to get on that plane to the Congo. So I would have died. Then, in the next loop, he comes back and saves me, only to have me die again when he can't get back to save me the next time."

"Precisely," Wells said. "And on and on in an endless loop. It's like ... instead of throwing just one rock in a pond and watching the waves it creates ripple through time, you're throwing rock after rock after rock into the same pond in a never ending progression. Eventually, the pond no longer exists. The water has been replaced by a pile of rocks."

"When I took Clark to the future, I left him in a spot in the world still unaffected by the changes this time loop is causing. But Metropolis now looks like a war zone. Most of the buildings have been leveled. Most of the people are dead. And now that the destruction caused by this loop has begun, it will continue to accelerate. We don't have much time. So please ... " He gestured to the head sets.

"But surely ... why can't I just remember. I'll get on that plane. I promise. I just ... I don't want to forget what Clark and I shared," Lois said.

"If you know your life is in danger, you'll never be able to react as you should. Please, Ms. Lane. Everyone you care about is in danger."

"But you're asking her to ..." Molly began.

"I know what I'm asking," Wells said. "I also know whom I'm asking. Ms. Lane, please. I'm asking you to trust in fate."

"I don't really have much choice, do I? I can live for four additional years, when the entire world will be destroyed, killing me anyway. Or I can do what you need me to do to save my world. To save Molly and Clark. To save my family." She glanced over at Molly. "Not much of a choice."

"Very well, then," Wells said. "If you two will just ... "

"But there is a problem," Lois said.

"Please, Ms. Lane, time really is of the essence."

"Mr. Wells, if I die, Clark is only going to build another time machine and come back again. And without my memories, I'm not going to remember why it's important for me to get on that plane to the Congo."

"Oh, my, I hadn't thought of that."

"So ... I need to make sure he doesn't come back." She closed her eyes, trying to marshal her thoughts. "A dear John letter. I'll date it a couple of years from now. Make him believe I've met someone else and want to live my own life." She pulled in a shaky breath. "It's going to kill him."

"There is no other choice, Ms. Lane."

"Will that really stop him from coming back to try to save you?" Molly asked. "From what I saw of Char ... Clark, he would want to save you even if you never loved him in return."

"She's right," Lois said, letting out a slow breath. "Then I need to level with him. Tell him the truth. Make sure he knows this is my decision. And pretty much beg him to accept it." She looked at Molly. "It's still going to kill him."

"Okay," Molly said, "I can see why you need me to do this, too — so that I don't say something that might keep her from going to the Congo, or mention Clark, or give something else away that changes the past. But ... how does this work? Won't we just have big gaps in our memories?"

"Yeah," Lois said. "And what about Stafford? I don't want him walking because I can't remember something."

"Don't worry. The mind is a remarkable thing. It will fill in the holes left behind by Clark's absence. You won't have any idea that anything is missing."

"Why doesn't that exactly reassure me?" Lois asked.

"So ... does this mean the two of you agree?" Wells asked hopefully.

"I don't see that we have any choice," Lois said. "Just ... give me a few minutes to write a letter to Clark and ... "

"Very well," Wells said, turning his attention to preparing the machine.

It was the hardest thing she'd ever had to write. And in a rush, she didn't even have a chance to consider her words. The break had to be absolute, final. There could be no doubt left in Clark's mind that not only was there no future for them, but to try to change that fact would destroy the world.

When she wrote that she was choosing this fate a small sob rose in the back of her throat. When she talked about how they'd tried and failed and that he had to let her go, her hands shook. When she added that she wanted him to find someone else, to fall in love and be happy, the tears started.

She moved back from the desk slightly so that none of her tears fell on the letter. If he saw water marks, he might not buy the confidence with her decision that she was trying to convey. He might see them and decide to come back, just to be sure of her feelings. She couldn't allow that to happen.

Knowing it was time to end the letter, she told him to get on with his life. To forget about her. To accept that they were never meant to be. That she was certain there was a wonderful woman out there, just waiting for someone like him to notice her. Then she signed it: 'I'll always love you. Please respect my decision. Don't come back. Your wife. Lois.'

"Are you ready?" Wells asked as she put the letter into an envelope.

"Yes," Lois said, hesitating only slightly before handing Wells the letter.

Molly and Lois sat on the sofa and picked up the headsets.

"Just put them on," Wells said. "I'll take care of the rest."

"Are we really doing this?" Molly asked.

"I don't think we have a choice," Lois responded.

Molly nodded before both Lois and Molly put on the headsets.

Well, this was it. Her last time to remember Clark. His love. His touch. His kiss. The kiss that had saved her life. But ... wait a minute! If the kiss had saved her life, what had changed as a result of them making love?

There was a jolt of energy and then ... darkness.

Lois blinked as she took in her surroundings. What had happened? Some sort of dizzy spell, she supposed. After all, she'd heard ... or was that read somewhere that she could expect some dizzy spells after GHB poisoning.

It took her a moment to remember where she was. The sorority house. She'd come to see Molly ... who was sitting next to her. But who was the strange little man putting something in a black bag. Or ... was he taking it out?

"Who are you?" Molly asked the man, voicing Lois' thoughts.

"I came to see if you wanted to buy a vacuum cleaner. The nice young woman at the front door let me in. So if you will just allow me to explain to you the advantages of ... "

"Sorry," Molly said, interrupting him. "We really aren't interested in buying a vacuum cleaner."

"Are you sure I can't convince ... "

"I'm sure," Molly said, rising to her feet. "Now, if you'll just allow me to show you to the door."

"Oh, certainly. I guess if you're not interested, you're not interested," the man said, zipping up his bag and turning towards the door.

Lois was lost in thought as she watched him leave. He'd almost looked relieved that they weren't interested in buying a

vacuum cleaner. She gave her head a shake. What was wrong with her? Getting paranoid about the motives of a vacuum cleaner salesman was not exactly ... normal.

"Is he gone?" Lois asked when Molly reentered the room.

"Yeah. I'm glad. I don't know why, but for some reason, I really didn't like that guy."

Lois nodded. Funny. She'd felt the same way.

June 1997

The sound of a low growl like thunder continued to grow until it was a roar. Clark doubled over when this headache hit. He grabbed his head and collapsed to his knees. This headache was worse than the others in that not only did his body feel as if it were being pulled apart, but this time, his heart felt as if it was being torn in two. The thunder finally passed and the pain eased.

"Lois," he gasped.

Something had happened to Lois.

He couldn't wait for Wells any longer to get his answers.

Lois. He had to know that Lois had survived. A moment later he was airborne and on his way to Metropolis.

PART SIX

'Forsaking All Others'

December 1987

"So what did you want to see me about, Detective?" Lois asked, settling herself in the chair beside Henderson's desk. Suddenly, she was distracted by how clean the desk was. The permanent stack of files were gone. The pictures and other mementoes were gone. In fact, if Henderson hadn't been sitting behind it, Lois would have had the distinct impression that she was at the wrong desk. "You quitting or something?"

"No. But well, I've got my own office now ... or will have when they've got it ready for me."

"An office all your own? Who did you have to kill to get that, Detective?"

"Well, it's not Detective anymore. It's Inspector. I've been promoted."

"Congrats," Lois said, smiling at him. She couldn't think of anyone she'd rather see promoted. And unless she knew better, she'd think he was smiling too. "Well, now that you're some big wig, I can't imagine why you'd be wasting your time meeting with me."

He rolled his eyes. "Whole lot of hullabaloo about nothing if you ask me," he grouched. "Had all my files just where I wanted them, too. But apparently it wouldn't look good to have an inspector sitting at a desk out here. Anyway, enough about that. I asked you to come today because I wanted to bring you up to date on what's happening."

Lois immediately pulled out her reporter's notebook and flipped it open. It had been over two and a half weeks now since Bob Stafford had been arrested and she'd been wondering what was happening with the case.

"First, the D.A. has made a deal with Paul Benson. We won't be pursuing charges against him in exchange for his cooperation and testimony against Bob Stafford. I doubt we could have made any of the charges except the assault actually stick anyway. At least it would have been a fight. And the information the D.A. has managed to get from Benson has put the final nail in Stafford's coffin."

"Was Paul involved?" Lois asked.

"No ... except as a confidant after the fact. Apparently, Stafford needed someone to brag to about his 'conquests' and I guess Benson fit the bill."

"So he knew about Mayson and me and he didn't say anything."

"He claims he didn't know that Stafford had drugged you. He had his suspicions after you submitted that story that Stafford

may have drugged someone — but since you didn't identify yourself, he didn't know it was you. But apparently following Wesley's death, he'd gotten Stafford's word that he was going to ... How did he put it now? Oh yes. Such a charming way to phrase it, too. Benson said that he got Stafford's word that he was going to 'stop all that foolishness.'"

Lois' eyebrows rose. "Foolishness? Sounds more like 'crimes' to me." Then she redirected her mind to other matters. "So he knew about Mayson."

Henderson nodded. "And a number of others."

"Others?"

"According to Benson, in addition to you, Wesley and Drake, there've been seven victims over the time Stafford's been at NTU. We've been taking statements for the past couple of days. A lot of the women had missing gaps in their memories, but most didn't even know they'd been raped. Most of them were aware that something had happened, but didn't know exactly what.

"Then I got a call earlier today from an officer in Philadelphia, where Stafford is originally from. Apparently, this officer read your story when it was syndicated in the Inquirer and recalled a number of complaints they received a few years back from girls who maintained that they'd somehow been abused, but who couldn't recall the details. When he dug a bit further, he realized the complaints had all come in when Stafford would have been in high school there. So he decided to get in touch with us. Not sure they will be able to prove Stafford's involvement in those, but the officer wanted to know what we had in hopes of looking further into the matter."

"Wow! Guess I got lucky," Lois said. "Although ... I have to admit that I really wish I knew who saw me leaving the party and turned me over to Molly. I'd really like to thank him. But Molly doesn't know who he was any more than I do."

"Well, if I hear anything, I'll let you know. Anyway, Stafford actually kept ... mementos of his conquests and Benson was able to direct us to them — including one that ties him to Wesley the night she died. As a result of all this, I hear that Stafford's lawyer is clamoring to make a deal."

"A deal?" Lois asked cautiously.

"Don't worry. Stafford's not getting out. Most the D.A. is prepared to do at this point is talk about taking the death penalty off the table for Wesley's murder. Her parents are apparently all for that as they're your bleeding heart liberal types who don't believe in the death penalty. So with the pressure the D.A.'s office is getting from both the accused's lawyer and the victim's parents, I suspect a deal will eventually be hammered out that will see Mr. Stafford spending the rest of his life behind bars."

"So ... no trial?"

"Probably not. Although, that's not for publication yet. I'll let you know when you can run with it. I'd like to have the ink dry on the paper first."

"Fair enough, Det ... Inspector," Lois said. "What about the Philadelphia investigation? Is that on the record?"

Henderson nodded. "I think the officer in Philadelphia is hoping a little news coverage might bring some evidence to light. I suspect he's already spoken to the Philadelphia press though, so I doubt you'll be looking at an exclusive on that information."

Lois made note of that in her notebook. "Anyway, can I get the names of those other women?" she asked, looking back at Henderson.

Henderson hesitated. "I assume that you want to track some of them down, see if they will give you an interview."

Lois nodded.

"Normally, names of rape victims are not released to the press without their authorization. But I'll tell you what ... Do you have business cards?"

Lois nodded. "The Ink and Quill provides cards to its reporters."

"Okay then. You leave me a few cards and I'll give them to anyone who might be willing to talk to the press about what happened."

"Really?"

"Well, given that you're one of the victims and the fact that you solved this case for us, I'm prepared to go that far. It will be up to them to decide if they want to take you up on it."

"That would be great, Inspector," Lois said, pulling some cards out of her backpack and setting them on his desk.

"So ... why don't you get out of here? Don't you have a deadline or something? Or are you planning to hang around here all day just to bug me?"

Lois grinned as she flipped her notebook closed. "I'll just get out of here then. But I'll be in touch when I solve your next murder for you."

She couldn't be entirely certain, but she thought she heard a muffled laugh come from Henderson as she walked away from his desk followed by a very satisfying comment.

"I don't doubt it, Lane. I don't doubt it at all."

She was just about to push open the door to the station when she was suddenly hit by a wave of dizziness. She reached out, steadying herself against the doorframe, and closed her eyes. Shouldn't these dizzy spells caused by the ingestion of the GHB have passed by now?

It was only Wednesday, but Lois still headed for the Ink and Quill. She wanted to get her notes typed up from her meeting with Henderson while it was still fresh in her mind. She hoped some of the women called her to tell their stories, even anonymously. Maybe she'd even call Mayson Drake and see if she would agree to tell her story.

The room was busy, the normal hubbub of activity that increased daily as the week went on, heading towards that Friday morning deadline.

She had just settled into her seat when she was distracted by the sound of silence. Glancing around, she noticed that everyone seemed to be looking in the same direction — Paul's office. She turned in her chair just in time to see Paul walk out of his office carrying a large cardboard box.

What was so interesting about that?

Still, she watched as he progressed across the newsroom, obviously heading for the door.

"Hope you're proud of yourself, Lane," he snarled as he passed her desk.

Huh?

"Listen up, everyone!"

The sound of a man, calling for everyone's attention brought her eyes back to Paul's office the second after the door to the Ink and Quill closed behind Paul.

"Due to recent events," their faculty adviser said in his normal monotone voice, "Mr. Benson has been removed as editor of the Ink and Quill. And I would suggest everyone take this as a lesson. He's not being removed due to any indiscretions on his part, although we could undoubtedly have made a case for that. He's being removed because, by killing a story about the danger to women on New Troy University's campus, he allowed his personal interests to interfere with his duties as editor. To quote Edward R. Murrow, a reporter's job is to report the news 'without fear or favor' and Mr. Benson ..."

Lois tuned him out as her eyes flicked over to Linda who was sitting at her desk, a stunned look on her face. Lois felt a small smile tug at one corner of her mouth, realizing that through all this, Linda had completely missed out on what was really going on with Paul. For some reason, Lois found that thought immensely satisfying.

"... so I'd like to introduce you to your new editor," their faculty adviser continued, recapturing Lois' attention. "I believe

you all know her since she has been working here for the past three and a half years. Katie Carrick. Katie, come on over here and say a few words."

Lois smiled. She didn't know Katie well, but she had to admit, she had a feeling Katie was going places. Besides, it would be nice to have a woman in charge for a change. Lois settled back in her chair and listened as Katie gave a short address.

"... and so let me end with this," Katie finally said.

"Competition is one aspect of the job, but if you're too busy worrying about the competition, you don't focus enough on what you're doing. So, people, don't worry about the competition, whether it's in here or out there. Just concentrate on getting the best stories you can for the Ink and Quill."

Lois' eyes again settled on Linda. Katie was right. No matter what Linda had done by stealing Lois' story about the football players, it was time for Lois to get her mind focused on what really mattered. Getting the next story.

Just then, the phone on her desk rang. She quickly picked it up. "Lois Lane."

"Yes, Ms. Lane. Inspector Henderson suggested I call you," the woman on the other end of the line began.

Lois quickly picked up her pen, her heartbeat jumping a notch. Speaking of the next story ... "Can you tell me your name?"

February 1988

Lois ran up the front stairs of the Alpha Nu Rho sorority house, an open letter clutched tightly in her hand. Throwing open the door, she stepped inside.

"Close that door before someone freezes to death!" one of her sorority sisters, Sue, yelled.

Lois grinned, pushing the door shut. She stomped the snow off her boots before bending down to remove them. Then, sticking the letter momentarily in her mouth, took off her coat and hung it up in the closet.

"Hey, Sue. Where's Molly?" she asked after removing the letter from her mouth.

"In her room, I think," Sue responded.

"Thanks," Lois said, grinning at her before turning to rush down the hall towards her friend's room.

"Hey, Mol," she said as she threw open the door to Molly's room and bounded inside.

Molly looked up from behind a pile of textbooks and smiled. "Don't you look like the cat who ate the canary?"

Lois grinned, waving her letter. "I got in."

"You got in?" Molly exclaimed, jumping to her feet and grabbing the letter. She pulled the letter from the envelope and began reading furiously.

"Yep. I'm going to Ireland for the fall semester's exchange program."

"Hey, that's great. You know what they say about Irish guys."

Lois laughed. "No, what do they say about Irish guys?"

"No idea. But with those accents, it's gotta be something good." She handed the letter back to Lois. "So you're all set then."

Lois nodded. "Mother and Daddy think it will be a great opportunity to expand my horizons so they're on board."

"Without which you'd never be able to afford it."

"Without which I'd never be able to afford it," Lois confirmed.

"That's great. I know how much you wanted to do this. Hey, maybe you'll even meet a real live leprechaun."

Lois plopped herself down on the bed with a bounce.

"Now ... that would be a story worth getting. Almost as good as ... flying aliens coming to earth."

"Well, unless those aliens take over the world."

"Nah," said Lois, dismissing the idea with a wave of her hand. "In my story, it would only be good flying aliens, out to fight for truth and justice."

"Well, get the leprechaun story first." Molly sighed. "I tell you, though. I'm really going to miss you."

"Hey, it's not until September. And ... I'll be around all summer, too, what with my internship at the Daily Planet. You'll probably be sick of me by September."

"I doubt it. And fall semester is going to be awfully boring if I'm not spending all my time pulling your fat out of the fire."

"I'll be back in January. Hey, maybe you'll even find yourself some nice guy to liven things up around here. Probably won't even notice I'm gone."

"As if," Molly responded, her countenance suddenly changing.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think ..."

Molly gave her a sad smile. "No, you're right. I've just got to forget about Ryan. It's been ... what? Three months now?"

Lois shrugged. "You loved him," she said. "I don't think there's a time limit on getting over a broken heart."

"Do you still think about Paul?"

Lois shook her head. "It's funny. But it's like ... I can hardly remember even liking him. I don't think I went through more than one night of feeling bad that Linda stole him. Guess it wasn't love, after all."

"You're lucky. I'm never falling in love again."

"Hey, don't say that! Some day, you'll meet a great guy and you'll be like: Ryan who?"

Molly smiled at Lois, but it was obvious that she didn't believe her.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Molly said, turning and digging through her files. She pulled out a couple pages of paper. "Ta da."

"What's that?" Lois said, reaching over and taking the papers.

"I finally figured out how to recover your story off the computer. You know, the one about the football players not writing their own exams. And ..."

She handed Lois a couple more pages. "These prove that the story, which you saved prior to the paper being released, was purposely deleted. You can now prove it wasn't Linda's story."

Lois studied the papers for a moment. "Paul's no longer the editor of the Ink and Quill. The editor of the Daily Planet knows it was my story. I managed to get an even bigger story."

"So ... you don't care about the fact that Linda stole your story anymore?" Molly asked.

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far," Lois said. She looked back at the papers. "I'll just hang onto these for now — in case it becomes an issue. As far as Linda is concerned ... I doubt we'll ever be friends again. But ..."

She shrugged. "I'm just sorry you went to such trouble to retrieve this."

"No trouble," Molly said. "It was a challenge. It was fun."

Lois chuckled. "Have I ever told you you have a strange definition of fun?"

"Oh? And yours is better?"

"Touche," Lois said with a grin. She looked over at Molly's books. "So what are you working on?"

"Algorithms."

"Huh?"

"An algorithm is a computational technique meant to solve a problem in a finite number of steps." Molly giggled at the blank look on Lois' face. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

"Sure. Just because you don't think I ... Oh, god ..."

A moment later, Lois was off the bed, running to the bathroom. She didn't stop, didn't slow. Yet for all her rush, she barely made it in time to empty the contents of her stomach into the toilet.

She continued to heave long after there was nothing more to throw up. Sweat accumulated on her brow. Her hands trembling as she gripped the sides of the porcelain bowl.

Then she felt gentle hands, smoothing her hair back and a wet cloth bathing her forehead in cool moisture.

Finally, her stomach settled, and closing her eyes, she sunk back onto the floor. She heard the toilet flush and a newly freshened washcloth was slipped into her hands. Gratefully, she raised the cloth to her face and let the cool of the cloth bring her back to the land of the living.

She heard Molly take a seat on the side of the bathtub, but didn't open her eyes. She knew her friend was watching her, thinking the same thing she'd voiced on many occasions over the past couple of months. Any moment now, she knew that Molly was going to say ...

"This isn't a stomach bug, Lois."

Well, that was predictable. Next she was going to be telling Lois ...

"I bought a pregnancy test the other day. I want you to take it."

Lois' eyes snapped open. "Wait a minute! That's not what you're supposed to say. You're supposed to be telling me that I need to go see Doctor Maria!"

"Would it do any good?" Molly let out a breath. "I may still be insisting that you do that. But ..."

She let out another breath. "I mean, look at the symptoms. When was the last time you had your period?"

"Stress, Mol. That's it. With the whole Stafford thing, the negotiations, the renegotiations, the info coming out about new charges in Philadelphia and, finally, his plea last week. It's been a pretty stressful couple of months."

"Lois ... Please?"

Lois looked at her friend. She couldn't be pregnant. After all, pregnancy was always proceeded by one particular act — one that she hadn't participated in. Her period ... That was just the result of the stress of the past couple of months. Dealing with the situation around Stafford. And since he had only pled guilty last week, as a result of a plea bargain finally made with the D.A., it wasn't unusual that Lois might have experienced some stress.

Still, looking into Molly's eyes. Seeing the plea there ... What would be the harm in humoring her?

"Okay, fine. You win. Besides, I've always wanted to know exactly how one of those tests works," Lois said. "Might come in handy some day."

Lois stared at the small cylinder in disbelief. It couldn't be. It just ... couldn't.

"Well?" Molly asked, poking her head into the bathroom.

Lois set down the cylinder and picked up the instructions again. Maybe she'd misunderstood. Maybe the liquid was supposed to stay red if you were pregnant. Maybe light gray meant you weren't pregnant.

Molly was suddenly there, reading over her shoulder. "It's definitely gray."

"But ..."

Lois said, her mind refusing to accept what she was seeing. "I must have done the test wrong."

"Lois, that's the second one you've done."

"Then I'll get another one. It's obviously wrong. It has to be."

She took a step back from Molly, shaking her head. "I can't be pregnant, Mol. I mean, after all I've never ... you know. And last I heard that was sort of prerequisite to being pregnant."

"There is another possibility, Lois," Molly said softly.

"No, Mol. There isn't."

"Lois, you have to consider that last November, at that party ..."

"Don't say it. Just ... don't say it." Suddenly, a new idea came to her. "Besides, according to Doctor Maria, I was still a virgin following that party."

"Maybe she made a mistake."

"Or ... isn't it more likely that I made a mistake with the

pregnancy test? It's not exactly the easiest thing to do."

"That's exactly why you need to see Doctor Maria."

Lois' expression softened. "Touche."

"So ... call and make an appointment?" Molly asked, her eyes pleading. "Even if that test is wrong, there is a problem. A stomach bug doesn't last for two months. You have to admit that."

Lois knew she'd been out maneuvered. With a final sigh of defeat, she nodded.

June 1997

Herb looked around. He was at the right spot. He checked the time on his time machine. And it was the right time. Fifteen minutes since he'd gone into the past to stop the paradox. So ... where was Clark?

Unless ... No. He wouldn't have.

Of course he would have. He'd gone to find out if Lois had survived.

Well, then. Time really was of the essence. He had to get there before Clark realized Lois hadn't returned from the Congo and built another time machine to go back to save her. He surely wouldn't go to any time he'd previously been — for fear of running into himself. Still, when he went into the past and realized that Lois didn't remember him, he would undoubtedly go to a time between 1987 and 1993 and get Lois to fall in love with him all over again. And given what Clark now knew, that was undoubtedly what he would do. That would start the loop all over again.

And given how fast Clark could move ... No, there really wasn't much time at all.

Resetting the controls on his time machine to arrive behind the Daily Planet one minute into the future, he pressed the button, opened the door and stepped through.

February 1988

"So? What did she say?" Molly demanded the instant Lois returned to Dr. Maria's waiting room.

Lois took a brief look around at the other patrons. "Not here," she told Molly, grabbing her friend's arm and directing her towards the door.

They were settled in Molly's car before Molly turned to her again. "So ... ?"

"So," Lois repeated, studying her hands.

"Well, what did she say? Does she know what's wrong with you? Come on. You're scaring me here."

Lois mumbled something Molly couldn't make out.

"What?"

"I'm pregnant." The words hung between them for a moment before Lois continued. "How can I be pregnant, Molly?" She looked imploringly at her friend.

"Did she say how far along you are?"

Lois nodded. "Almost three months."

"But that would take you back to mid-November ..."

"The night of the party." Lois shrugged. "Probably."

"But ... how does she explain the examination she did when you went in to see her the next day?"

"She can't. She tells me that she would have sworn I was still a virgin. But that if I can't remember having sex with anyone else, and had no other problem with memory loss after that night, she must have been wrong. After all, she wouldn't be saying that after examining me today. Mol, I haven't dared touch a drop of alcohol since that night."

Molly let out a slow breath.

"Are you going to tell Inspector Henderson?" Molly finally asked.

"Tell him what?"

"That Stafford raped ..."

"No! Look, I don't know that Stafford did anything to me that night other than drugging my drink and ..."

"Lois," Molly began patiently. "You have to admit that in all likelihood Stafford was lying about only sending the football players in your direction. He must have done that to defuse suspicion on him after he ..."

"Don't say it."

"Lois ..."

"Okay, I know you're probably right. But just ... don't say it." Lois placed a protective hand over her stomach.

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, I'm not going to report this to Henderson."

"But ..."

"Mol, Stafford has already gone to prison for life. One more charge isn't going to make any difference. And no matter what, I never want this child ..."

She let out a breath. "I don't want anyone to even hint that this child could be Stafford's. No. I had a one night stand with a handsome stranger. Got it?"

"But why ..."

"I don't want this child ever knowing he or she was the result of my being raped. Whether it was Stafford or someone else. I never want that information coming out! Never!"

"Are you saying you're planning to keep the baby?" Molly asked in disbelief

"I don't know what I'm saying," Lois wailed. "I just ... I need time to ... think." Tears well up in her eyes. "I can't be pregnant, Molly. I just ..."

Her voice broke. "... can't."

Molly scooted across the front seat of the old Ford and gathered her friend into her arms, rocking her back and forth until the worst of the storm passed.

Finally, slipping back over to the driver's side of the car, she noticed a couple people on the sidewalk outside looking at them strangely. "What?" she asked through the glass. "Never seen two women making out before?"

The strangers turned and quickly scurried away.

A watery laugh from Lois was her reward.

"Come on," Molly said, starting the engine. "I've got a sudden hankering for hot chocolate."

Lois had never been scared to enter her parent's house before. Her folks might not have always been the most attentive parents. They were too caught up in each other and their work to pay much attention to the fact that they had kids. Lois had inherited that same 'all work' attitude. That was what made this decision so remarkable, out of character, even. But for reasons she couldn't articulate, even in her own mind, this was something she had to do.

She took a deep breath. Okay, well ... maybe there wasn't as much reason to be scared as she feared. After all, her parents had always been basically supportive, even if they didn't always understand her decisions. Lois' desire to be a reporter was a good example. Yet they supported her in that, right? Well, sort of anyway. Was this really so different?

Okay, maybe this was a little different. She had to concede that. This wasn't exactly what one would call ... good news. But surely they would calm down quickly and they could talk it through.

Then why was she so scared? Maybe it was just that she had no previous experience to go on. After all, she'd never brought home truly bad news before. She'd never brought home a bad report card or been caught smoking or skipping class — well, except for that time when she had been investigating the case of the stolen bracelet when she was eleven. But she'd broken that case wide open, so she'd been ready to fight — to argue that she'd done what she had to do to get her friend's bracelet returned when one of the older girls had stolen it.

That hadn't gone so badly. She'd been left with the distinct

impression that her folks were trying to fight laughter more than anything when she'd launched into her passionate defense of her actions.

But this wasn't a skipped class.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door. She'd called and said she needed to talk to her parents so she knew they were waiting for her. And now that she knew what she was going to do, it was time to bite the bullet, as it were.

"Hey, princess. Is that you?" her dad called from the living room.

"It's me," Lois confirmed, removing her coat and boots before taking a deep breath. This was it. No point in dawdling ... She hesitated a moment, wondering where she'd ever picked up that word ... before putting one foot in front of the other as she made her way to where she knew her parents were waiting for her.

Sam and Ellen Lane stared at their daughter in stunned silence.

"How long?" her father asked when he finally regained the power of speech.

"Almost three months," Lois responded.

"And we're just hearing about this now?" Ellen asked.

"I just found out myself."

Sam's eyes narrowed. "Three months? Isn't that about the time someone slipped GHB into your drink?"

"That has nothing to do with this," Lois said quickly. "I know it's around the same time, but I wasn't raped that night. Dr. Maria confirmed that."

"Then who's the father?" Sam demanded. "And why isn't he here with you to take responsibility?"

"I didn't even know you were serious about someone," Ellen added.

Lois swallowed hard. She knew the story she was about to tell. After all, it was the same story she intended to tell everyone. But these were her parents. If anyone was going to see through the lie, it would be them. Still, fighting her nerves, she launched into her tale. "He was a guy I met around that time. He was just visiting some friends at the University. One thing led to another and ... It was only once, but I guess you know what they say, once is all it takes." She tried to keep her tone light, hoping they would follow her lead. They didn't.

"This is no joking matter, young lady," Ellen said.

"I'm not joking," Lois objected. "Once is sometimes all it takes. Or was something left out of the sex education you gave me?"

"Don't sass your mother," Sam said.

Lois closed her eyes. "Sorry ... It's just ... "

"What?"

"Nothing."

"So what you're telling us is that you had unprotected sex with some guy you barely knew?" When Lois shrugged, Sam continued. "Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?" He reached for the phone. "I'm going to have Maria Chives run some tests on you for STDs."

"She already has, Daddy," Lois said.

"Well, we still need to call her to schedule the abortion," Sam said, picking up the phone.

"I'm not having an abortion," Lois said, her heart pounding in her ears. She'd heard her parents talk often enough about this issue to know their views. So she had known that their assumption would be that she would have an abortion. And it wasn't that she had any particular difficulties with that course of action. But in this case ... No. For reasons she'd been struggling to articulate for the past few days, and still couldn't, she wouldn't abort this baby.

"Lois, you must realize how difficult it will be to carry this

baby to term and then give it up for adoption," her mother said.

"Having an abortion is the only practical choice."

"I'm not having an abortion ... "

"But ... "

"And I'm not giving this baby up for adoption." She waited then for the explosion she knew was coming, the objections about her ability to raise a child, the impracticalities, how her education would suffer, everything that they would be certain she hadn't taken into consideration.

Her parents did not disappoint. Together, they began, talking over each other in their disbelief and shock that she would even consider keeping the baby.

"This is ridiculous," her father finally said, picking up the phone. "I'm going to call Maria right now and schedule that abortion."

"You can call," Lois said. "But I'm not having an abortion."

"Well, you can't keep the baby," Ellen said. "It's due when ... August? What happens to your summer internship at the Daily Planet? Will they even want you when they find out that you aren't necessarily going to be available for the whole summer?"

"And what about Ireland?" her father added. "Do you really think they will still take you into the exchange program if you have a baby to take care of?"

"Because," her mother said, "we won't be volunteering to take care of it for you while you're off living it up in Ireland."

Tears formed in Lois' eyes. "I'm not sure what is going to happen with the internship," Lois said. "I'll set up an appointment with Mr. White to tell him about this — see if he will consider letting me do it for however long I can. But even if he says no ... " She pulled in a shaky breath. "As for Ireland ... I mailed a letter to administration on my way to see you telling them I wouldn't be able to participate in the exchange program to Ireland."

"What?" her parents gasped simultaneously.

"You sent a letter to administration before even talking to us?" Ellen asked.

"Well, I knew ... "

"You had no right to do that before talking to us," Sam cut in.

"I knew, just like you pointed out, that I'd never be able to go to Ireland if I kept the baby."

"The question of your keeping the baby is far from settled, young lady," Sam said.

"I'm twenty years of age. I'm old enough to make this decision for myself."

"You're twenty. But you're still living on our dime," her father pointed out. "And as long as that's the case, we expect to have a say in your decisions."

"I'm going to university on a full scholarship," Lois argued.

"And we're paying the upgrade on your housing," Sam said. "Not to mention extra spending money, clothes, and all those other unexpected expenses."

"And if that stops, how do you think you'll be able to afford to go to university?" Ellen said. "Who is going to pay for the baby? What about child care while you're in class? Will they allow you to go on living in the dorms with a baby? I doubt your fellow students are going to take too kindly to listening to a baby scream at two o'clock in the morning on the night before an exam."

"So what are you saying?" Lois asked.

"If you do this, if you decide to keep the baby, you're on your own," Ellen said.

Lois turned fearful eyes on her father. She hadn't considered this. "Daddy?" she asked.

"I'm with your mother." Then his tone softened. "Princess, there is no reason for you to be saddled with a child now. We'll be happy to pay for an abortion. There will be plenty of time to have children when you're older."

Lois looked at the resolute faces of her parents. "If that's your final word," Lois said, rising to her feet and tilting her chin up, "I guess there's nothing more to say."

"I'll schedule the abortion," Sam said, again reaching for the phone.

"I told you. I'm not having an abortion," Lois said, as she marched towards the door, leaving a stunned Sam and Ellen Lane staring after her.

Lois nervously waited in a chair in Perry White's office. She wasn't sure how to persuade him that, even pregnant, it was worth it to the Daily Planet to invest its time and money in her.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Lois," Perry said, entering the office. "It's just been one of those days."

Lois was instantly on her feet. "No problem," she said.

Perry gestured her back into her chair. He closed his office door and was walking to his desk when a quick knock proceeded the door being opened again.

"What's this?" Perry growled when Ralph came in and handed him a document.

"From legal," Ralph said before scooting back out the door.

Perry took a quick look at the document. "Great shades of Elvis!" he said. "Sorry, Lois. This should just take a minute."

And then he was gone again.

Great. Just what she needed. Trying to convince him to keep her on when he was already completely stressed out. And she desperately needed this job. After all, she was going to need every penny she could save if she planned to go to school next year.

Speaking of which, when this meeting was over, she was going to need to do some serious number crunching.

"Sorry about that," Perry said, from the doorway. "Now ... What can I do for you?" As he spoke, he sat down behind his desk.

"It's about my internship this summer. Something has come up and ... Well, I just thought you should know about it. I mean, I hope it doesn't affect you wanting to give me the internship. After all, I desperately need to work this summer. Oh, that's not to say that's the only reason I want the internship. I know it probably seemed like it was. But it isn't. It's always been my dream to work for the Daily Planet and I can't thank you enough for offering me this internship. I know it must seem ..."

"Now, hold on," Perry said interrupting her. "Why don't you tell me what you think might jeopardize your chances at this internship you want so much and we'll take it from there?"

"Oh, right. I sort of skipped that part, didn't I. Well, it's nothing really. Hardly worth mentioning. No big deal. I just ..."

"Lois."

She blushed, realizing that she was babbling again. Problem was, she just wasn't sure how to say ... "I'm pregnant." Had she really just blurted it out like that? "And I'm just worried that ... Well, I know you didn't sign on for that. So I'd understand if you decided that ..."

"Let me get this straight. You came in here to tell me you're pregnant and to find out if I still wanted to offer you the internship as a result?"

Lois nodded, nervously fiddling with her hands.

Perry gave his head a sad shake, causing Lois' heart to drop.

"Lois, I'm disappointed in you," he finally said.

She cringed. For some reason, it mattered that she had this man's respect.

"You want to be a reporter, right?" Perry said.

Lois nodded, fighting off the tears she knew were coming.

"Then you need to learn something right now."

He paused and she braced herself for the bad news.

"Never ... ever walk into an interview," Perry began, "without doing your research."

"What?" Lois asked, suddenly not sure what was going on.

Perry rose to his feet and withdrew a thin paperback book from his bookshelf. He flipped through it until he found what he was looking for. "Title VII of the Civil Rights Act was amended in 1978 to prohibit discrimination on the basis of pregnancy. That means, I can't refuse to hire you or fire you based on the fact that you're pregnant."

"What?" Lois jumped to her feet, leaning across his desk to look at the book. He handed it to her and she began reading furiously.

"Research, Lois. Research is the life's blood of journalism."

Lois let out a breath of relief.

"Now ... sit down. We need to talk logistics."

"Logistics?" Lois said, sinking back into her chair.

"When are you due?"

"Mid to late August. I don't have an exact date yet."

"Okay, well we'll play it by ear then. As you get closer to your due date ..."

He hesitated briefly and she suspected that he was doing some backwards math from August. The considering gaze he gave her when he'd completed the basic math had her fighting the urge to squirm. Well, he might have his suspicions about the identity ... or at least the likely identity of the father, but if she didn't confirm it, he couldn't know for certain. But since he was one of the people who knew that a date rape drug had been used on her ... She set her chin, silently daring him to ask the question.

"Anyway," Perry continued after a moment, "when you get closer to your due date, we'll probably need to make some concessions to your condition. Now, get out of here and I'll see you in May. Unless you have any more questions."

Lois shook her head, grateful that he hadn't forced her to lie to him.

"And when you do show up at the beginning of May, I expect you to bring in a piece for the Sunday supplement about the Civil Rights Act. I suspect it's time to give our readers a brief review of their rights. And it should drive in the point for you that a reporter never goes into an interview without having done her research. Kapish?" He pointed his finger at her to drive in his point.

Lois smiled. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Now get out of here. I've got work to do."

"Yes, sir."

She turned towards the door.

"Oh, and, Lois ..."

She looked back at him.

"Congratulations."

Lois unexpectedly found herself fighting off those tears. He was the first person to congratulate her and it felt unexpectedly ... nice.

April 1988

Lois sat at the desk in her room, studying the numbers in front of her. Part of her had hoped that her parents would relent when it became obvious that her mind was made up. Seemed that was not the case. The only time they called to talk to her now was to find out if she'd come to her senses yet.

Grandma Lane had left Lois a thousand dollars when she died when Lois was seven. According to her updated bank book there was now two thousand one hundred fifty-eight dollars and ninety-three cents in that account. Then there was the pitiful amount she'd managed to save herself from various summer jobs. She'd even finally cashed the cheque she'd received from the Daily Planet for her first story, putting it in the bank along with the money they'd paid her for her follow-up stories. Still, all together, she didn't see how her savings could possibly cover next year's expenses.

Her tuition and books would be paid for by her scholarship. However, she'd checked into dorm policy, and there was no way

she could stay in the dorm with a baby. Not only would she not have her own room, due to her parents withdrawing their support, but even if she had, there were no babies allowed in the dorm.

She'd inquired whether the dorm allowance could be given to her to find a new place to live, but apparently it couldn't. She could still get food vouchers to eat in the cafeteria and even take that food home with her to eat every night. So that solved her food issue for her, but she had no idea how long the baby would be satisfied breast feeding.

So that left rent, utilities, baby supplies, transportation costs and ... What was she missing?

Child care! Oh, god. How was she ever going to afford both rent and child care for when she was in school? And then there was the crib and ... whatever else a baby needed. Maybe she could find some part time work. But then, at minimum wage, how much would she have left after paying for someone to watch her baby while she was at work?

She'd looked into scholarships and bursaries that might be available to single mothers. There were none. Child care at the university. Nope. Not for a newborn. It seemed that universities were simply not equipped for new single mothers. That was definitely a cause she intended to see changed in the future. Not that it helped her right now, of course.

Maybe it was time to consider dropping out of school ... At least until the baby was older. After all, she'd been crunching these numbers for two months — every time with the same results.

A knock on the door pulled her out of her threatening depression. Rising to her feet, she walked to the door and opened it.

"Hey, Mol," Lois said when she saw who was standing on the other side.

"I need you to come with me," Molly said.

"I really can't right now," Lois said. "I'm trying to ..."

"Right now," Molly said, reaching into the closet to grab Lois' jacket. "Come on. Put on your shoes. We have to go."

"At least let me get changed," Lois said, looking down at the University of Kansas t-shirt she was wearing with her jeans. She had no idea where she would have picked up a faded University of Kansas t-shirt, but for some reason, she always found herself putting it on when she was stressed or worried.

It seemed to calm her.

"Okay, you can change," Molly conceded. "Just make it fast. We really have to go."

Molly had refused to say anything since they had left her room. It was only a few minutes later before Lois realized their destination — the sorority house.

"What are we doing here?" Lois asked.

Molly only smiled.

Lois rolled her eyes. "I really have some planning to do," Lois said, tempted to turn around and go back to her room.

"Oh, hush," Molly said, grabbing Lois' arm and practically dragging her up the steps to the house.

When she stepped inside, she saw the house crowded with women.

"Surprise!" they all yelled in unity.

"What ... What is this?"

"Well, we figured a baby shower was in order. And so we decided that now was the time — before everyone got caught up in exams or took off for the summer," Tracy responded.

Lois glanced at Molly and every one of her sorority sisters and friends who had gathered and found herself fighting off tears. She ... really hadn't expected this. People knew about her pregnancy. It was impossible to be making the inquiries she had over the past month or so without people finding out. But this was a response she hadn't been expecting.

"Now, don't worry," Molly said. "We know how much you hate all those stupid shower type games so ..."

"We found as many of them as we possibly could and we're going to force you to play every single one," Cat said.

Laughter followed as Lois was dragged the rest of the way into the house and pushed into a chair.

"Oh, great," Lois moaned playfully, getting into the spirit of things. "Torture the pregnant woman."

"Absolutely," Molly responded.

Lois was beginning to understand the purpose of a baby shower as she opened another present — help out the overwhelmed pregnant woman by buying her all sort of stuff to get her started. The gift finally open, she stared in awe at the cute little denim overalls and leather jacket Linda had given her. They reminded her of her baby's daddy.

What? No. She'd never seen Stafford wear a leather jacket. Besides, this baby didn't have a daddy. None whatsoever. She quickly pushed the thought of some sort of connection between a leather jacket and the baby's father from her mind. Strange the tricks the mind could play sometimes.

She'd been surprised to see Linda there since the two of them hadn't exchanged more than a few words since last November. Lois had heard, however, that Linda and Paul had broken up some time ago. Predictable, really, given Paul's loss of status at the paper.

But something had changed in Linda. It was as if the entire incident had broken her spirit by embroiling her in the controversy surrounding Paul and Bob. Gone was the cocky, confident and often sarcastic young woman who had once been Lois' friend. In her place was someone who appeared to be scared of her own shadow, expecting attacks around every corner. Lois supposed it was understandable since Linda had become something of a social leper in the past few months as people wondered how much she had known about Stafford's actions. She'd even heard rumors that Linda was thinking of going to a different university next year.

Lois almost felt sorry for her. Not quite enough to want to be her friend again. After all, she simply didn't trust Linda enough anymore to want to give her another chance to hurt her. Still, she was touched by Linda's gift.

"It's adorable," Lois said, looking up at Linda in surprise.

Linda shrugged uncomfortably. "I know you don't know if it's a boy or a girl, but I figured ... what the heck," Linda said. "Just put a pink bow in her hair and everyone will figure it out. But when I saw it ... I just couldn't resist."

"Well, I love it," Lois said. "Thank you."

Lois looked around at the stack of clothing, and the car seat Molly had given her. When Lois had objected that the car seat was too much, Molly had brushed her off, commenting that if Lois was going to keep borrowing her car, she was going to need the car seat.

"We have one final thing for you," Molly said, before looking over at the President of Alpha Nu Rho, Tracy.

"Yes," Tracy said, standing up to take center stage. "We had a meeting ... And given what you've done for all of us by putting that scum bag, Bob Stafford, behind bars where he couldn't hurt another woman ever again ..."

"Hear! Hear!" Cat said.

Lois grinned at Cat. There was another surprise — that she and Cat had become friends over the last few months — even if that outfit she'd given Lois for the baby was a little ... over the top.

"We took a vote and it was unanimous," Tracy continued. "We decided to give you this." With that, she stepped over to Lois and handed her a small box with a big bow on top.

Turning her attention to the item, Lois pulled the bow away

and opened the box.

"Oh ... Well, I don't quite know what to say," she said, pulling out a key. "I wasn't expecting one of these. I'll give it a cherished place on my key ring though."

Molly batted her arm.

"It's a key to one of the rooms here, silly," Molly said.

Lois' expression went blank. "What?" she asked.

"We'd like you to live at the Alpha Nu Rho house, with the baby," Tracy said. "You can move in whenever you'd like. Since the rent and expenses on this place are paid for by the alumni, it doesn't cost anything. And we all figure we can help out with taking care of the baby next year while you're in class. We even have the room fixed up so ..."

Lois burst into tears.

After the party finally broke up, Lois sat on the edge of the bed in the room that was to become her new home, looking around in awe. It was one of the bigger rooms. One that had been occupied by a girl who had graduated in January. Like all the rooms at the sorority house, it had a desk and bed and its own bathroom. But that wasn't all this particular room held.

This room also had a number of second hand items in it that the girls had bummed from relatives and friends. A crib. A change table. A Disney mobile hanging above the crib. Boxes filled with baby blankets, second hand clothing and sundry other items, many of which Lois didn't even recognize but had been told she would absolutely need.

"Hey, you okay?" Molly asked from the doorway.

"It's just so ..." Lost for words, Lois gestured absently around her. "This was your idea, wasn't it?"

Molly came into the room, closing the door behind her. "No," she said, taking a seat next to Lois. "I'm ashamed to say it never even occurred to me. Not sure why, though, given the number of times I've had to listen to you gripe about the university's policy on babies in the dorms and lack of resources available for single mothers to go to university." She playfully bumped her shoulder against Lois'. "Maybe it's just that you're not the typical sorority sister," she added. "No, this was their idea. And once they got started ..." She gestured around her. "... there was no stopping them."

"Well, I'm grateful. You have no idea."

"I think I do," Molly responded with a grin. "And, hey, it should also help with saving money this summer since you can live here while you work at the Daily Planet."

"That's true. Oh, Mol ... it's just ... such a relief to finally have a workable plan. I was starting to think that ... I wasn't going to be able to do this. That I'd have to drop out so that I could support this baby." She hesitated for a moment. "Do you think they know?"

"Know what?"

"The baby's father ..." Lois didn't say anything more.

Molly shook her head. "Other than Cat, they don't even know that you were one of Stafford's victims. So ... no. I don't think they know. But ..."

"What?"

"Well, it's odd ... but I think one or two of them think they know who the father is."

"Are they saying it's Stafford?"

"No. In fact, one of them asked me if it was that guy who was hanging around here for a week or so last November."

Lois' eyebrows rose. "Do you know who they are talking about?"

Molly shook her head. "But I just sort of ... let them believe that. Figured it would keep them off your back. And since they couldn't remember the guy's name, it's not as if he's going to show up and demand to know why you're saying he's the father."

"Thanks, Molly, but please ... Please promise me that you

will never say anything." Lois placed a protective hand over the small bump that was beginning to show in her stomach. "I don't want the stigma hanging over this baby. As far as the world is concerned, this is my baby — and only my baby."

Molly bit her lower lip. "I will do whatever you want on this issue, but ... Well, have you ever considered doing some investigating on your own to find out ..."

"I can't, Mol," Lois said, cutting Molly off. "If I even start looking into it, people are going to find out this baby was the result of ... I won't do that to my baby. So ... promise me you'll never tell."

"Lois, don't worry. No one will ever hear it from me."

Lois relaxed, marveling over how protective she'd felt about this baby, and that issue, since she'd first learned she was pregnant. Maybe there was something to the idea of a protective maternal instinct, after all.

"What about you? Hasn't anyone ever asked you who the father is?" Molly asked.

"Sometimes. But I just say it's no one they know or change the subject or that we don't have contact. They don't ask a second time."

August 1988

Lois carried the research she had assembled over to Serena Judd's desk and waited to be noticed. Rumor around the Daily Planet was that Serena and Billy Norcross were about an inch away from a Pulitzer.

Lois knew she often acted like a ninny around Serena and she hated it. But this was the Serena Judd! Only the most famous female print journalist in the world at the moment. The same Serena Judd who was being considered for a Pulitzer. The fact that lately Serena specifically asked for Lois when she needed research done was a real honor. An honor Lois had worked hard all summer to live up to.

"Bastard," Serena muttered to herself, pulling Lois out of her thoughts. "Lying, scum-sucking bastard."

"Excuse me?" Lois asked.

Serena looked up, startled. "Oh, I'm sorry, Lois. I was just ..." She made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "Did you want something?"

"I have that research you were looking for," Lois said, setting the documents she'd assembled on the corner of Serena's desk.

"Oh, thanks."

Lois nodded and began to turn away when she stopped. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"What? Oh fine."

Realizing she was being dismissed, Lois nodded and began to turn away again.

"It's just ..." Serena said, causing Lois to stop once again. "Men!"

Lois grinned.

"What is it about them? They say they love you and then ... Aaag!" She took a deep breath. "Maybe I should just move to Alaska and teach yoga to oil workers or something."

Lois giggled. "You don't want to do that. Not with your gift as a reporter."

"I don't know. I think maybe I do."

"You can't ..." Lois suddenly looked down in horror. "Uhh ..."

Serena's eyes followed hers. "I think your water just broke," Serena said.

Lois' eyes widened further. Not only had she completely humiliated herself in front of her hero, but ... Oh, god. No. She wasn't ready for this. What had made her think she even wanted to do this? Could she change her mind?

"What's going on out here?"

Oh no. Perry. How was it he always seemed to magically

appear whenever something was happening in his newsroom?

"Lois' water broke," Serena said.

"Well, what are we standing around here for?" Perry demanded. "Ralph! Grab the keys from my office and bring my car around to the front door."

Ralph moved quicker than Lois thought she had ever seen. She was fairly certain it had more to do with getting the hell away from her than helping her out.

"Now, honey," Perry said, addressing Lois, "can you walk?"

"Uhh ... yeah," Lois said. She couldn't be in labor. Okay, so maybe her back had been a little bit sore all day, but ... "Aagh!" she gasped when her first contraction hit.

"Okay, Lois. Just breath." He demonstrated and Lois attempted to match his breathing. "Now ... what's your doctor's name?"

"Dr. Maria Chives," Lois said through the pain.

"Serena ... find Lois' doctor. Tell her we're on the way to the hospital."

Serena quickly grabbed the phone book.

"And call Lois' folks," Perry added.

"And Molly Flynn ... The numbers are all in my rolodex,"

Lois gasped.

"Thanks," Serena said, bolting towards where the interns' desks were located.

"Now, Lois," Perry said. "Just hang onto me."

She knew that her fear was clear on her face.

"Hey, don't worry. I'm an old pro at this," Perry said. "Two kids and six kittens."

"Kittens ... great," Lois said as the pain finally faded.

Perry laughed as he began leading her towards the elevator.

"Do you want to meet your son?" Molly asked. As Lois' child birth coach, the nurse had handed the squirming infant to the other woman.

Molly didn't wait for Lois to answer, instead, a tender smile on her face, she came over and placed the newborn into his exhausted mother's arms.

"So have you decided on a name?" the nurse asked as she worked around, cleaning up.

Lois stared down in wonder at the bright eyes looking back at her and decided in that moment that only one name seemed to fit. "Charlie," she said.

"Charlie?" Molly asked, slightly surprised as she reached out to let Charlie wrap a fist around her finger. "Where did that come from?"

Lois shrugged. She and Molly had discussed names on several occasions and she could understand Molly's confusion. Never had the name 'Charlie' come up before now. "It just seems to fit," she said.

Molly tilted her head as she studied the baby. "Yeah, I guess I can see that. Well, Charlie ... how exactly do you feel about being the first male member of Alpha Nu Rho?"

Lois smiled tiredly as she looked into the face of her very confused looking son, marveling that something that had caused so much pain could be so unequivocally beautiful.

Lois tucked the blankets around her son and dimmed the lights. Standing beside the crib, she stared down at Charlie, wondering how she could feel so much love and so much fear at the same time. His first night in his very own crib. And Lois had to admit, she was terrified. What if he cried and she didn't know what he wanted? What if he got sick and she didn't realize it?

She reached over and touched his brow. Was he too hot? How was she supposed to know? Maybe her folks had been right. Maybe she wasn't ready for this.

No. No, she'd learn. She'd mastered everything else she'd ever set her hand to. Well, except for plants. They always died on

her. Oh, god! What if she forgot to feed the baby and he died just like her plants always did? She might do that, too. After all, she always had the best of intentions when she got a new plant — intending to remember to water it and then ... A few days later, she'd forget. Then the next time she'd look the plant would be dead!

Maybe she wasn't responsible enough to take care of a baby — someone who would rely on her for absolutely everything.

No. She could do this. One day at a time. And when that got to be too much, one minute at a time.

After leaning over to give Charlie one final kiss, she turned on the baby monitor and slipped out the door. Right now, what she needed was a bite to eat to settle her nerves. Then she'd come back and check on Charlie again.

She was just about to push open the door to the kitchen when she heard the sound of a man's angry voice coming from inside.

"I can't believe you got rid of my beer. You know that Golden Springs Beer was mine."

"Two bottles, Rye! And you know I don't drink. It sat in the fridge for six months. I finally decided to give it away. Can you blame me?" Molly's angry voice responded. "We broke up."

"Come on, Mol. I know you still have feelings for me."

"Let go of me."

Lois quickly pushed open the door and stepped into the kitchen. "You heard the lady," she said, when she saw Ryan holding onto Molly's arm. "Let her go."

Ryan released Molly and turned towards Lois.

"This is your fault. You turned her against me. You'll regret this."

"Get out, Ryan," Molly said.

A couple of other young women had joined Lois in the doorway.

"Hey, I'm gone," Ryan said, seeming to decide retreat was his best option.

The women all congregated around Molly, who was visibly trembling, until Ryan finally left the room.

"Sorry about that," Tracy said. "He said he'd left a couple beer in the kitchen and since he's a Beta Beta member I told him to come in and get them."

"It's okay," Molly said. "I'm just ... " She shook her head.

"Hey, Tracy, maybe you should tell your father about Ryan," Sue said.

"Why?" Lois asked, confused.

"Tracy's father knows guys who know guys," Sue said.

Tracy rolled her eyes, and Lois and Molly laughed.

After turning on the baby monitor, Lois grabbed a tub of ice cream out of the freezer. She placed it on the table before digging in a drawer to find four spoons.

"Something tells me we could all use this after ... " She gestured vaguely towards the door Ryan had left through. The women quickly agreed and, when each had grabbed a spoon, they sat down at the table for a good gossip session.

"So are any of you tennis players?" Tracy asked as they dug into the ice cream. "'Cause I'm looking for a doubles' partner ... "

The sound of a crying baby coming over the monitor interrupted the conversation.

"I guess that's my cue," Lois said, rising to her feet and, after taking a deep breath and reminding herself that she really could do this, left the room.

May 1991

Lois tossed her cap in the air with the rest of the graduates. Finally. With a huge smile on her face, she looked around until she spotted Molly. Charlie was sitting in her lap and Molly seemed to be pointing Lois out to the young child. Beside Molly sat Lois' parents. Although they had finally come to accept that Lois wasn't going to give up her child, the rift that had started

when Lois had spurned their demand for her to get an abortion had never truly healed.

Lois sighed. Well, at least they had taken the time to come to her graduation. Lois pushed her way through the crowds. As Charlie saw her approach, he squirmed out of Molly's lap. When Molly realized his intentions, she let him go and a moment later, he was running for his mother.

"Hey, kiddo," Lois said, bending down to scoop him up in her arms. "Whoa, you're getting heavy. What have you been eating? Bricks."

Charlie giggled. "No, Mommy. I not eat bicks."

"You don't eat bricks," Ellen Lane corrected.

Lois rolled her eyes. "Mother, Daddy ... I wasn't sure you would make it."

"Well, we only came for the ceremony," Sam said. "I'm afraid we have to get back to the hospital."

"Of course," Lois responded.

"So what's the plan now?" Ellen asked. "Because you know ... considering everything ... " Her eyes flicked to Charlie.

Lois' chin came up. Her mother better not say anything more explicit in front of Charlie or there would be hell to pay.

"... it's not going to be easy for you to work as a reporter. After all, it's not exactly what you could call a nine-to-five job."

"Actually, Mrs. Lane," Molly said. "Lois and Charlie are going to be moving into my apartment."

"And I have a job at the Daily Planet," Lois added.

"That's all well and good, but what happens to this one while you're both off at work?"

"Actually, I've just left my job at Spartan," Molly said. "So I'm going to keep an eye on Charlie when Lois is at work until he can get into the daycare program that the Daily Planet is in the process of setting up — thanks to Lois' campaigning. After that, if she needs to be out in the evening for her job or if Charlie is sick and can't go to daycare, he will stay with me."

"So you quit your job to take care of Charlie?" Sam asked, giving Lois a disapproving look.

Lois didn't need more to know what her father was telling her — that this wasn't Molly's problem and that Lois shouldn't be taking advantage of Molly that way. She had just opened her mouth to respond when Molly laughed.

"Oh, don't worry, Mr. Lane," Molly said. "I was planning to quit anyway. The hours working there were atrocious. And I made enough in two years to keep me going until I can get my own program up and running."

"Your own program?" Ellen asked.

"You've heard of the internet?" Molly asked. When they shook their heads, Molly continued. "Basically, it's a worldwide network of computers that uses both TCP and IP protocols to facilitate data transmission ... "

"It's the next big thing in computers," Lois translated for her friend.

"So this is your computer program? This internet thing?"

Molly laughed. "No. I'm actually working on a program that will allow people easier access to information on the internet. I'm thinking of calling it Gaagle. At the moment, the internet is still pretty small, but trust me when I say, it's going to be huge. And it's only a matter of time before people need a way to search it for information. And I plan to be the first game in town. Eventually, people will even talk about gaagling for information. I figure when people start using the name of your program as a verb, you've really made it."

"Molly's going to be filthy rich," Lois said, grinning at her friend.

"Well, I think it sounds like a dumb idea," Ellen said.

"Leaving a good paying job to work on some crazy idea for something called the internet when no one has ever even heard of the internet. Trust me when I say that this internet of yours will

probably never be anything more than a fad. And all so you can stay home and care for another girl's child?"

Lois felt fury rise in her chest.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Lane," Molly said, demonstrating much more patience than Lois was inclined to at the moment. "I would have left my job even if I'd never met Lois or Charlie. It just wasn't for me. In fact, if I didn't have Lois and Charlie in my life, I'd probably be writing poison-pen books about how technology is killing us, living like a hippy and selling crystals to new-age wanna-bes by now. So it's great for all of us that this worked out the way it did."

"Well, I hope so," Ellen said. "Because I'd hate to think of you compromising your career because of my daughter's foolish choices."

"Don't you have to get back to the hospital?" Lois asked pointedly.

"Yes, actually we do," Sam said, taking Ellen's arm. "Good to see you again, Molly. And congratulations, Princess."

When Sam and Ellen were far enough away, Lois turned to Molly. "Sorry about that."

Molly laughed. "Hey, don't worry about it. My folks are having problems grasping that I'm going to make a gazillion dollars from this, too. I guess that's the burden we geniuses just have to bear. Now ... what do you say we get out of here? I'm taking you out for lunch to celebrate your graduation. So where are we going? Your pick."

"Chunky Cheeses!" Charlie exclaimed causing both Lois and Molly to laugh.

"Okay, Chunk E. Cheese it is," Lois responded.

August 1992

"Hey, kiddo," Lois said, her face lighting up in a smile when she saw Charlie squirming to get out of Molly's arms as she carried him on her hip.

Molly stopped, quickly setting Charlie on the floor so that he could begin running across the newsroom, leaping into Lois' arms as she squatted down to grab him.

"Mommy, Mommy, Molly and I got ice cream. I got chocolate — just like you. I shared mine with a big dog."

"You did, did you?" Lois asked, glancing at Molly who shrugged in response.

"Can I get a dog?" he asked.

"Sorry, kiddo. No can do. We don't have room in the apartment."

Charlie's bottom lip came out at her pronouncement and Lois had to smile. Her son reminded her so much of herself sometimes.

She picked up Charlie as Molly arrived at her desk.

"Thanks for picking him up, Mol."

"Hey, no problem. Any time I get to spend with my boyfriend here is time well spent." She reached over, mussing Charlie's hair.

"I'm not really her boyfriend, Mommy," Charlie said confidentially to Lois. "She just say that."

"Oh ... okay," Lois said, amused.

"Hello, Cherie," a man said, entering the conversation. "Well, who's this?" he asked when he seemed to notice the boy in Lois' arms.

"I'm me," Charlie said.

"Hi, Claude," Lois said, addressing the man. "This is Charlie — my son."

"Hi, Charlie," Claude said before looking back at Lois. "I have tickets to a play tomorrow evening. What do you say? Will you finally agree to go out with me?"

"No," Lois said. "And I really wish you'd stop asking."

"Not until you say yes," Claude said, winking at her before walking away.

"Okay, so who exactly was that?" Molly asked when Claude was out of earshot.

"No one of any significance." When Molly raised her eyebrows, Lois continued. "Okay, he's a new guy Perry just hired. From France. Seems to think I'm his belle chérie, or something." Lois rolled her eyes.

"Lois, you can't keep turning these guys away. Eventually, they're going to stop asking."

"And the problem with that is ... ?"

"Come on! You can't tell me you don't want to find a nice guy and fall in love."

Lois let out a breath. "Mol, I've told you. I'm not interested in just going out to go out."

"No? Well, tell me this. How are you ever going to know if it could be something more if you don't ever go out with any of them? I mean, take this Claude guy, for example. Good looking. Decent job. Accent that could un-curdle sour milk. Knows you have a son and seems to be okay with it. What's wrong with him?"

"He's not what I'm looking for."

"How could you possibly know that? The purpose of dating is to get to know someone — find out if he's right for you."

"Molly, there's a super guy out there, waiting for me to come along and turn his life upside down. I know there is."

"Lois, who was the last guy you remember kissing?"

Lois noticed the way Molly had worded the question, but let it go as she thought about the question itself. "Joe — I guess."

"High school, Lois!"

Lois set Charlie down when he began squirming in her arms. She smiled as she watched him take off, running at full speed towards his beloved godfather.

"Uncle Perry!" Charlie yelled before lunging at Perry.

"Hey, sport. Bring any good news stories for me today?"

Perry said as he carried his godson towards his office.

"There was a big dog. I shared my ice cream with him."

"That's a forty point headline for sure," Perry responded, disappearing into the office.

Lois turned to her friend. "Don't worry about me, Molly. I promise, I'm fine."

Molly sighed. "Well, I'm going to head out now. Some of us still have to date to find that perfect guy."

"You have a date tonight?"

Molly nodded.

"So ... spill. What's this guy's name?"

"Mitchell."

"Mitchell? Not the same Mitchell who works for my father?" Lois asked.

"One and the same."

"Molly, he's a hypochondriac!"

"Lois, he's a doctor ... or well, doing his residency anyway.

It's only natural that he's always thinking about medical stuff. Anyway, it's just a date. If he gets the sniffles and decides to go home early, it's not as if I have to go out with him a second time." She winked at Lois before heading towards the elevators.

Lois shook her head as she watched her friend leave. She envied her friend her ability to treat dating so lightly. But for some reason, she just wasn't able to make herself do the same. No. Her super guy was out there. And she would know him when she met him. She just knew it.

And anyway ... at least she wouldn't end up like Serena Judd. Although the entire newsroom had been flabbergasted, Serena really had moved to Anchorage to teach yoga to oil workers. Not that Billy Norcross had fared much better. After Serena had left him, he'd emptied every bottle in the tri-state area. Lois wasn't entirely sure what had happened to him after that.

Lois was surprised when she entered the apartment later that

evening to find that there was light coming from the living room. Molly, after all, was very careful to always turn off the lights when she went out. Something about saving the planet, although Lois had never quite figured out how one tiny light bulb was going to destroy the planet.

"So what are we going to make for supper?" she asked as she helped Charlie out of his jacket and shoes.

"Pizza."

Lois laughed. "Sorry, kiddo. How about macaroni and cheese?"

"Yeah." Charlie took off into the apartment as Lois finished taking off her things and putting them away. She marveled as she did so as to how much she'd grown up in the last four years. Before Charlie, she'd have simply tossed her coat over the nearest chair. Four years. Was it really possible? Well, next week was Charlie's fourth birthday so it must be.

She still wasn't sure why keeping Charlie had been so important to her — not that she could imagine life without him now. But looking back at the time he was born was still terrifying. Those first nights at the sorority house had been a nightmare. She'd been convinced that she was going to kill the little guy. That every cry was a sign that she was failing miserably as a mother. That every sneeze was a sign that he was coming down with some terrible illness. If it hadn't been for Molly and her other sorority sisters, she'd have never made it. She could never hope to repay them for all they'd done for her.

Finishing up in the front area, she stepped into the living room, stopping suddenly in surprise.

"Molly? Weren't you going out with Mitchell tonight?"

"I called and cancelled," Molly said, looking up at Lois for the first time. Her eyes red from crying.

"What's wrong?" Lois gasped.

Molly held up a letter. "Remember Ryan?"

Lois nodded. Of course she remembered that jerk. He and Molly, as far as she knew, had barely spoken since the day she'd brought Charlie home from the hospital. And then ...

"Didn't he join the military or something?"

Molly nodded. "Some big, hush, hush government project. Anyway, when I came home after dropping Charlie off with you, this was waiting for me." She handed Lois the letter.

Lois took the letter and sank onto a chair as she began to read. It was dated three weeks ago.

'Dear Molly, 'Before going into combat, you've probably heard that soldiers write letters and ask their buddies to mail them if, for some reason, they don't come back. Well, I'm not going into combat, exactly, but this assignment will be dangerous and before I left, I wanted to write you a letter. If you're reading this, I guess that means I won't be coming back.'

Lois looked up at Molly in shock. "Why you?" she asked. "You guys broke up almost five years ago now."

Molly gestured to the letter. Lois, taking her hint, continued reading.

'I guess I just wanted you to know that I still love you. I loved you from the moment you spilled your coffee all over my textbook the first day of basic computers and I'll love you until the day I die. I know because of the things that happened, I lost your love. And I know that we let others come between us.'

Lois fought the urge to snort. The man was dead, after all. But even as he wrote his last letter, he refused to acknowledge that it was his words and actions that had cost him the love of the incredible woman sitting across from her. As for the comment about others coming between them ... No illusions as to who he was blaming there.

'But as I prepare for this mission, I can't help wishing we had started our own little computer company like we talked about back in school. You know, don't you, that I never would have joined the military if we had been together. All I ever wanted was

to be with you. But I guess some thing are just not meant to be.
'All my love always, Rye.'

"It's my fault he's dead, Lois," Molly wailed. "I know he was a jerk. But maybe if I just hadn't been so stubborn, so convinced I was right about him, we could have found a way to patch things up. He never would have joined the military and he wouldn't be dead."

Quickly, Lois placed the letter on the coffee table and moved over next to her friend, taking her in her arms as she let the other woman cry it out.

"It's not your fault, Mol. He made his own choices," Lois said, knowing she'd be saying those words over and over again during the course of the next few hours and days.

"I loved him, Lois. I know he had his faults, but I really did love him."

"I know, sweetie. I know."

April 1993

Lois had that feeling in her gut. The feeling that told her that she was hot on the trail of a good story. That any moment, any day now, she was going to bust the whole thing wide open.

It was a good feeling.

And it would be a powerful story. International gun smuggling. Payments in blood diamonds. Civil war. The undermining of governments. Bribes to high placed officials. And someone ... someone powerful making a hell of a lot of money.

Yep. This story had it all.

And she had a lead.

The Congo.

Perry had approved her trip and her bags were packed. Charlie would stay with Molly as he always did when she had to travel for work. Fortunately, it didn't happen all that often. Still ... What would she have done without Molly all these years? She didn't even want to contemplate it.

"Don't go, Mommy."

Lois turned from where she was standing in the check in line at the airport to look at her son. He appeared to be honestly distressed.

"Hey, kiddo," she said, squatting down to look fully at her four year old son — or, four and a half as he often corrected her. "I'm only going to be gone a few days. And you've stayed with Molly before."

"Don't go, Mommy," Charlie said again, this time throwing his arms around her neck as the tears started.

Lois looked up at Molly who looked as baffled as she felt.

"Hey, hey, hey," she said softly, wrapping her arms around her son. "I'll be back before you know it. And I bet if you ask really nicely, Molly will take you to Chunk E. Cheese for supper."

"Sure, Squirt," Molly said. "We'll have so much fun that you won't even notice your mother is gone."

"Don't go, Mommy," Charlie repeated, his tear stained face pulling at Lois' heart.

"I'm sorry, honey. I don't have a choice. It's my job. But I promise. I'll be back as soon as I possibly can."

Charlie's chin trembled and the tears continued, but he fell silent.

"Next," one of the attendants behind the counter said, forcing Lois to attend to the business at hand.

Lois was worried. Never had she seen Charlie being so clingy. As a child who had grown up constantly surrounded by a wide variety of people, he had developed an independent attitude, easily adapting to changing environments. And this wasn't the first time she'd had to leave him with Molly so that she could follow up on an assignment. Usually, all she'd get was a 'bye, Mommy.' In fact, if she hadn't known Charlie loved her, she

might have felt insecure at how easily he accepted her absences.

So to have him clinging to her as they walked through the airport worried her. By the looks she kept sharing with Molly, it seemed her friend felt the same thing.

Finally, knowing she was only making this worse by prolonging the time of her departure, she stopped, set down her carry-on bag and turned to her son.

"Well, this is it, kiddo. I'll see you in a few days."

Charlie was instantly in her arms, crying into her neck. She glanced at Molly over her son's shoulder and saw the tears in Molly's eyes that she knew were also beginning to form in her own. It was tearing both of them apart to see Charlie so upset.

Finally, tears of her own threatening, she pulled back, brushed a strand of hair from her son's face, told him that she loved him and turned him over to Molly. When she left, she didn't dare look back, not wanting her son to see the tears that had begun to slip down her own cheeks. She kept her steps brisk until she turned a corner where she was sure to be out of sight of Molly and Charlie and then stopped to collect herself.

"Ms. Lane?"

Lois looked around at the sound of her name being called to see a man, around her age, approaching. She quickly brushed the tears off her cheeks and then watched as he drew near. He was easily the best looking man she'd seen in a long time. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Pity about the glasses though. Without them, a woman could easily drown in those eyes.

"Yes?" she asked when he had finally closed the distance between them.

"You can't go to the Congo," the man said.

Lois' eyebrows rose. "I'm pretty sure I can," she informed this presumptive stranger. "I've got my ticket and everything."

"No, I didn't mean ... Ms. Lane, you have to trust me on this. You can't go to the Congo. If you do, you won't be coming home."

"And just how do you know this?"

The man suddenly looked decidedly uncomfortable. "Please, you must believe me. I just know."

"Okay, then. Tell me why I won't be coming back? Does someone kill me? Does the airplane crash? Do I get bit by a poisonous snake?"

"I don't know what happens, Ms. Lane. But please ... you can't go to the Congo. They kill you or make you disappear or something. I don't know what. I've never been able to find out. But please, don't go. It's far too important that you survive. Is getting this story about gun running worth your life? Please. Just believe me. You can not go to the Congo! You just ... can't."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Right. Now ... if you don't mind ... " She pushed her way past the handsome wacko.

"Please, Lois," the man said, reaching out and grabbing her arm. "Please, I'm begging you. You can't go to the Congo. Please don't get on that plane."

She stopped, staring at her arm until he released her. "Excuse me," she said before marching at full speed down the airport corridor. Who did that guy think he was anyway?

"GendellAir flight 5340 to Rome, Casablanca and Brazzaville is now boarding."

The announcement came over the PA system causing Lois to rush through security, ignoring the sound of the man again calling her name, still pleading with her not to go to the Congo.

To say that Lois was annoyed would be damning with faint praise. She was beyond annoyed. She was even beyond angry. She was livid.

And she was very, very late.

She pushed her way through the crowds in a rush to catch her plane. That jerk had made her late. If she didn't hurry, she would never board on time.

"Last call for GendellAir flight 5340 to Rome, Casablanca and Brazzaville. All passengers should now be on board."

The announcement coming over the P.A. system caused Lois to increase her pace. What had possessed her to stop and even listen to what he had to say? The guy was obviously a taco short of a combo platter.

"If you go to the Congo, you won't be coming home," she muttered to herself even as she skirted past a couple of women who seemed to be taking time to enjoy the view. View! Please! Like there was anything to see in the halls of the airport terminal — unless someone had an addiction for overpriced novelty items or designer water.

She switched into a jog, hoisting her carry-on bag further onto her shoulder.

She still couldn't believe she'd given that wacko the time of day. Okay, so he'd looked normal enough. And he'd seemed to know her, known that she was heading to the Congo to investigate a gun running story. She could even believe that she might be in danger. After all, the people behind this were obviously not going to be pleased to learn that she was hot on their trail. But Wacko wasn't warning her to be careful. His message was urgent, panicked, almost hysterical. He'd adamantly argued that if she made this trip, she was dead.

Not that he'd been able to give details. The who, what, when and where a complete mystery to him.

Who did he think he was, anyway? He was crazy if he thought predictions of gloom and doom were going to stop her. She hadn't won four Kerths by being careful. Maybe she didn't take as many risks as she might have without Charlie, but she had good sources and good contacts in the Congo. This was, in fact, one of her less risky ventures.

For all she knew, he was working for the people behind this plot, meant to keep her from completing her investigation. And she had taken the time to let him! Idiot! She was a complete and total idiot! And if he made her miss her plane, he was dead. She'd track him down and tear him, gorgeous limb from gorgeous limb.

Was that really why she'd stopped? Had she let herself respond to a pretty face?

Letting out a frustrated growl, she pushed her way past another group of slower moving passengers as she picked up her pace to a full run. She was not about to miss this flight!

Still, there had been something about his eyes ...

June 1997

Clark knew the instant he walked into the Daily Planet. He wasn't sure exactly how, but he knew. She wasn't there. She hadn't made it to 1997. She had disappeared during a trip to the Congo while investigating a gun running story four years ago.

"Lois, why did you go to the Congo?" he asked even as tears appeared in his eyes. She'd promised. She'd told him she wouldn't go. So how was it possible that she had?

"Hey, Clark ... you okay?"

He turned to see James Olsen, the young owner of the Daily Planet, standing nearby, looking at him in concern.

"I'm ..." Clark shook his head. He couldn't deal with this right now. Before Olsen could say anything further, Clark walked briskly down the ramp and entered the conference room, closing the door and pulling the blinds before he made a fool of himself in front of the entire newsroom.

After all, he'd just lost his wife. And it wasn't as if he could even tell anyone. He sank onto a chair at the conference room table and pulled out his marriage license.

"What happened, Lois? Why did you go?"

A knock at the door had him quickly stuffing his marriage license back in his inside pocket and brushing tears from his eyes.

"Can I come in, my boy?" Wells asked.

Clark leapt to his feet at Wells' entrance. "What happened?

How could she have gone to the Congo? She promised me, Herb. She promised me."

"My boy ... Well, I guess there is no easy way to say this. I ..." Wells looked down at the plain white envelope in his hands. "Lois asked me to give you this."

Clark was snatching the letter out of Wells' hands almost immediately. Tearing it open, he began to read, sinking to his knees in the middle of the room when the words of the letter began to sink in.

The anguish was more than he could stand. He saw Wells taking a step towards him and before the man's foot even touched the floor, Clark was gone, disappearing in a gust of wind as he sought to out-fly the agony in his heart.

Wells sighed before pulling the time travel machine out of his pocket. He stared at it for a long time, thinking hard. A moment later, Clark Kent wasn't the only one to literally disappear from the Daily Planet conference room.

PART SEVEN

'And Thereto I Pledge Thee My Troth.'

April 1993

Wells stared down at the ticket in his hands, debating again the wisdom of what he was about to do. He could see no real problems arising from this course of action. But still ... once it was done, it couldn't very well be undone.

"Il volo GendellAir 5340 per Casablanca e pronto per partenza alla uscita C-16. Si prego i signori passeggeri di recarsi alla uscita C-16," came the announcement in Italian on the PA system.

Well, it was now or never. He only wished he knew if this was the right thing to do.

June 1997

A week in the Arctic had taken the edge off Clark's grief. The temptation to ignore Lois' request that he not come back again was overwhelming. Still, she was right. They had no right to destroy their world just to spend a few years together. After all, as she'd told him in her letter, her survival would destroy, not only their universe, but her along with it. If he wanted to honor her sacrifice, then he had to accept her decision. As for him finding someone else ... That wasn't going to happen. Lois Lane held his heart and he couldn't even imagine it any other way.

So here he was back in Metropolis after grieving the loss of his wife for the past week. He might not have decided to return to Metropolis even yet except that he had started having brief, confusing flashes of memory. He hoped familiar surroundings might allow him to put them in some perspective.

For example, he remembered a jealous row from Lana, the woman he'd been engaged to before the other Lois had arrived in Metropolis. But this outburst hadn't been about him using his powers or Lois or Superman or any of the other things they had fought about near the end. No. It had been something ... different.

"I don't know why you insist on spending so much time with him! What's he to you?" she had yelled at Clark.

'Him?' Who was 'him'?

And maybe that by itself wouldn't have driven him from his sanctuary, but then he remembered something else. Something he chastised himself for not remembering right away.

Perry White had been shot.

Oh, he had no memory of it from his perspective, but Wells had told him that the reason he'd begun searching for Clark was because of Perry White getting shot. The last thing Wells had known was that Perry was fighting for his life at Metropolis General Hospital. Clark had no idea what year this might have happened, given Wells' ability to travel in time.

What Clark did know was that it was his fault. He'd gone into the past to save Lois and not only had he failed in that mission,

but he'd managed, by changing the past, to get Perry shot.

Yet in the week he'd been back, he hadn't even checked to see if his friend was alive. He had few enough friends as it was. He didn't think he could stand to lose another one.

So he was back in Metropolis — to check on Perry, figure out his life now, and then ... he had some tough decisions to make. Maybe it was time for him to move on, maybe somewhere where he could live anonymously, if that was even possible, and try to find some small amount of ... if not happiness, at least peace.

Still, there were some loose ends to tend to here before he could even consider leaving. So he landed in the alley behind the Daily Planet, intending to go inside by foot. Everyone might know he was Superman, but he didn't like it when they treated him differently as a result. It was easier to make that happen when he didn't rub his differences in their faces.

He was struck almost instantly by a fresh sense of loss as he recalled landing in this same alley on a couple of occasions in the past few weeks, both times so full of hope.

Refusing to dwell on it for fear that it would send him running back to the Arctic, he began walking briskly towards the entrance to the Daily Planet.

How could a ride up in an elevator seem to last forever and yet be over all-too-soon? Still, before he was ready, the doors opened on the floor of the newsroom. He probably shouldn't be here. After all, the last message Preston Carpenter had left on his answering machine was that if he didn't get his butt into the Planet immediately, he shouldn't bother returning at all.

That was more than a week ago.

Still, this was probably the best place to find out about Perry.

He stepped out of the elevator, wondering who might be around who would know what had happened to Perry — and wouldn't wonder about his sanity in asking. Maybe he'd be better off just using his computer to do some research and find out for himself.

"Well, look who decided to put in an appearance," a very annoyed sounding male voice said.

Clark spun around, expecting to find Carpenter standing there. It took him a moment to adjust his vision when he realized he was being addressed by a man coming towards him in a wheelchair.

"Perry?"

"Where've you been for the past week?" Perry asked, stopping in front of Clark. Then Perry's eyes widened. "And what happened to your beard?"

"Beard?" Oh, wait. The beard he'd had after one of his headaches. "Uhh ... I shaved it off. It itched."

"I can't believe you," Perry said. "First, you take off without leaving word with anyone. Then, you shave off your beard. Do you have any idea how worried he's been? He thought it was his mother all over again. He's lost too much in his young life for you to play with his feelings like this."

"Who?"

"Charlie! How could you do this to Charlie?"

Clark stared at his boss ... or was that former boss ... in confusion. Charlie. Who the heck was ... Suddenly, his eyes widened. "Charlie," he said, suddenly overwhelmed when a powerful memory hit him.

June 1993

"I don't know why you insist on being a reporter," Lana said, looking around the noisy newsroom in disgust.

Clark sighed as he carried a box filled with a number of personal items across the room. Why had he thought Lana might enjoy seeing where he was going to be working? She'd never understood his desire to be a journalist. Maybe he'd thought if she saw where he worked, felt the energy of the place, she'd

finally understand. Obviously not.

Still, since she'd arrived in Metropolis only yesterday, after he'd called to inform her that he'd gotten the job, it seemed ... rude to abandon her on his day off while he came in to get the feel of the place and unpack his stuff.

Fortunately, her family had moved to Metropolis a few years ago, so she could live with them until they got married. He briefly wondered if it was normal for a man to have times where he couldn't wait to dump his fiancée off with her folks. Oh, surely it was. After all, in all relationships there were problems. He had just been on his own for a long, long time. He'd adjust.

"If you'd just take a job with Daddy, you'd have your own office. How does anyone get any work done in this noise, anyway?"

Clark stopped beside the empty desk he'd been told was to be his and set the box on top.

"Didn't you say you had some shopping you needed to do to get settled in?" Clark asked as he began taking items out of the box and setting them on the desk. "Maybe you'd like to do that while I get settled here."

"I just might ..."

"This is my mommy's desk."

The sound of a young child interrupted Lana.

"No," Lana said, turning towards the young boy who had snuck up on them. "This is my fiancée's desk."

"No! It's my mommy's desk," the boy objected.

"No. It's my fiancée's desk. What are you doing here anyway? This is no place for a child. Why don't you just ... " She made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "Let the adults have their conversation in peace."

"Lana!" Clark said as he turned towards the boy.

The dark haired boy stood only head and shoulders above the height of the desk, but while they'd been talking, he'd moved the chair and crawled up on it so that he could begin putting Clark's things back in his box.

"What are you doing?" Lana objected. "Didn't anyone ever teach you not to touch other people's things?"

"No, Lana. It's okay," Clark said, putting out an arm to restrain Lana who looked as if she was about to begin taking his things out again.

Still, she was right about one thing. It was unusual for a child of ... what? Five maybe ... to be alone in a busy newsroom. So where was his mommy? Suddenly, he had a horrible suspicion.

"Who's your mommy?"

"Yes," said Lana. "And where is she? Someone should tell her that this is no place for a child."

Clark quickly turned to Lana, fighting the urge to strangle her. "Why don't you go do that shopping you need to do? I'll meet you at the deli on the corner when you're done."

"Fine with me," Lana said, turning and storming towards the elevators.

Letting out a breath of relief, Clark turned back to the boy who, now that he had put Clark's things back in the box, was attempting to drag the box off the desk. Clark quickly moved over to help him pick up the box, steadying it as he crawled off the chair.

Once the boy was back on the floor, he held out the box to Clark. "Go away," he said.

Clark took the box and set it on the floor.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Charlie." Charlie crawled back onto the desk's chair as if protecting it from Clark.

"Hi, Charlie. I'm Clark," Clark said, squatting down next to the chair.

The boy looked at him suspiciously, as if expecting some sort of trick to get the desk back.

"I'm sorry for taking the desk. I didn't know it belonged to

someone else,” he said, although the fact that there wasn’t anything on the desk was causing Clark to have his suspicions about whose desk it might have been. After all, he was not unaware of the news stories about a Daily Planet journalist who had recently gone missing while investigating a story in the Congo. “What’s your mommy’s name?”

“Charlie!” a woman called from the other side of the room. The woman was emerging from Perry White’s office carrying a box that looked suspiciously like the one Clark had used to carry his things into the newsroom.

Clark looked back at Charlie, wondering what he would do now. After all, he was obviously on a mission to protect this desk. Would he give it up to join the woman on the other side of the room? Still, it appeared that Clark must have been wrong about his assessment of who his mother might have been. Clark was relieved. He hated to think he was stealing the desk of this child’s dead mother.

But Charlie was not distracted from his mission. He seemed to settle his butt further into the chair, cross his arms and set his chin in defiance.

The woman, having spotted him, walked over, carrying her box. “Sorry about this,” she said. “Come on, Charlie. We have to go.”

A mulish expression appeared on Charlie’s face. “This is mommy’s desk.”

The woman set the box she was carrying on the desk and squatted down to talk to Charlie. “Oh, sweetie. I know this was mommy’s desk. But she doesn’t need it anymore so this nice man is going to use it, okay?”

Clark could hear the hitch in the voice of the woman as she spoke the words. He could also see that the boy was not convinced.

The woman obviously did as well because she rose to her feet and turned to Clark. “Sorry about this, but his mother ...”

“Was Lois Lane, wasn’t she?” Clark asked, fairly certain he’d worked out what was going on here. “She went missing in the Congo.”

Glancing at Charlie, Clark noticed that the boy’s bottom lip had come out with his pronouncement and tears now seemed to be forming in his eyes. ‘Way to go, Kent,’ he chastised himself. ‘Remind the boy that he’d lost his mother.’

“She’s not missing,” Charlie objected. “She knows where she is and she’s coming home. She promised.”

Clark glanced over at the woman and could see that her eyes were suspiciously moist, too. She looked a little helpless, as if not certain how to handle the situation.

Thinking quickly, Clark turned back to Charlie. “I hadn’t heard that,” he said. “Well, if she’s coming back, she’s going to need her desk.”

Charlie’s defensive posture seemed to relax slightly.

Clark looked over at the woman and gestured to the box. “Are these her things?” he asked.

The woman nodded.

“Well, what if we do this?” he asked, turning back to Charlie. “Why don’t you take some things from your mommy’s box and put them on the desk so that everyone knows this is her desk?” He glanced at the woman for approval as he picked up the box and moved it over where Charlie could reach into it. Looking relieved, the woman nodded.

Charlie looked at him suspiciously for a moment before looking in the box. He pulled out a picture of him with his mother and immediately set it on the desk. Then he chose a toy car and put it on the desk as well. By the way he handled the toy, Clark was fairly certain it was a prized possession. One final item, a name plate saying ‘Lois Lane’ was pulled from the box and set on the desk. Seeming satisfied that he’d marked out his mother’s territory sufficiently, he looked back at Clark.

Clark moved the box aside and squatted down in front of Charlie. “Do you think your mother would mind if I borrowed her desk until she comes back? ‘Cause I don’t have a desk and I really need a place to work. I’ll make sure to take good care of it for her.” He just hoped this worked because he really wasn’t sure what he would do if it didn’t.

“You’ll give it back to her when she comes home?” Charlie asked, searching Clark’s face for some sign he could trust him.

“I promise, kiddo.”

Something he had said seemed to reach Charlie. “Okay,” Charlie said. “But you give it back when she comes home.”

“I will,” Clark promised. And he would, too — even if that left him sitting on the floor. “In the meantime, these things will let everyone know that I’m just borrowing the desk. Okay?”

Charlie took one final look at the desk and at Clark before nodding.

“Why don’t you go say goodbye to Uncle Perry while I talk to the nice man for a minute,” the woman said entering the conversation again.

Satisfied, Charlie nodded, crawling off the chair so that he could take off at a run towards Perry’s office.

“Thank you for that,” the woman said. “I’m Molly Flynn.” She stuck out her hand which Clark promptly shook. “His mother was my best friend. He’s been having a tough time with ...” She glanced towards the office door. “... everything. Keeps insisting that she’s coming back.”

“Clark Kent,” Clark responded. “I lost my folks when I was ten, so I have an idea what he’s going through. By the way, for a moment there I thought he wasn’t going to go for my plan. But then something seemed to change.”

Molly smiled. “I think it was when you called him ‘kiddo.’ That’s what Lois always used to call him.”

Clark glanced towards the door to Perry’s office, his heart going out to the boy. “Poor kid. Well, hopefully his father can at least help — although I doubt anything can replace a mother when you’re that age.”

“He doesn’t have a father,” Molly said. “Lois named me as his guardian in her will and even though we won’t be able to have her will executed until she’s been missing seven years, so far her parents have been supportive of me taking care of Charlie. I just wish ...” Her voice broke and she gave her head a shake as if to clear it.

Not sure what he could say to ease her obvious pain, he directed his mind back to Charlie. “Well, any time he’s here, he can come sit at his mother’s desk. And I’ll be sure to keep her things on it.”

“Oh, you don’t have to ...”

“Yes, I do. I promised Charlie.”

Molly cocked her head to the side and studied him for a moment. “You seem really familiar to me. Have we met before?”

Clark shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Huh,” Molly said, not seeming entirely convinced. Then she shook her head. “Anyway, I really do need to be going ...” She picked up the box. “Thanks again for this.”

“No problem.” He watched her turn away. “Molly?” Clark said, causing the woman to turn back around. “Listen ... I know you don’t know me, but ... Well, I guess I sort of feel for the little guy and I was thinking ...” He hesitated.

“Well, I’m new to the city and thought ... maybe Charlie would be available to show me around the Metropolis Zoo sometime this weekend. I hear it’s supposed to be really impressive.” Then he shrugged sheepishly. “Sorry. That was a dumb idea.”

“No ... no ... It’s just ...”

“You don’t know me and for all you know I could be a child molester trying to prey on an innocent child. Hey, what if you came with him?”

He got the distinct impression Molly was not quite sure what to make of him. "Okay, sure," she finally said. "God knows he could use something to take his mind off how much he misses his mother."

"Great!" Clark said, surprised by how much he was suddenly looking forward to this weekend.

June 1997

"Charlie," Clark said softly.

Still, why hadn't he recognized the name Charlie or recognized Molly almost immediately? He almost slapped his forehead when the answer hit him. He hadn't gone into the past in 1993 and so had no memory of those events or people at that time. It was only now that he was back in his own time that he could put those memories in perspective.

"Are you okay, son?" Perry asked.

"Uhh ... yeah. I'm fine."

"Well, then I can't believe you would just take off for a week without telling Charlie. You know that if you're even five minutes late, he thinks something bad has happened to you."

"Why would he worry about me? He must know I'm Superman. Surely ..."

"What's wrong with you?" Perry hissed.

"What did I ..."

He fell silent at the look Perry gave him. "Come with me," Perry said, turning his wheelchair so that he could wheel down the ramp. He didn't stop until he was in the conference room.

"Have you lost your mind?" Perry asked after the door was closed behind Clark.

"I ..."

"Making that comment about being Superman in the middle of the newsroom," Perry said. "Heck, if I hadn't figured it out already ..." He shook his head. "What's going on with you? And speaking of which, how are you going to explain both you and Superman deciding to shave your beards before the charity event is over?"

"Charity event?" He felt like he was trying to fight his way out of quicksand. "I ..." His voice trailed off helplessly. Wait a second ... Charlie was Lois' son. Lois hadn't had a son when Clark had gone into the past. Suddenly, he was lost in another memory.

August 1993

"Uncle Clark?"

Clark was already smiling when he turned towards the sound a voice saying his name — a voice he was beginning to know well. Charlie was often at the newsroom. When Clark had inquired about the reason for this now that Ms. Lane was no longer an employee, Perry had informed him that he and Molly had decided that Charlie should continue coming to the day care center until he started kindergarten in September in an attempt to keep his routine as normal as possible.

After that, he would come by after school three days a week so that he didn't feel that, in addition to losing his mother, he was losing the friends he'd made at the Daily Planet — both at the day care and in the newsroom. Clark hadn't inquired further, but he had his suspicions that Perry was paying for Charlie's continued daycare out of his own pocket.

Not that Charlie was completely without his own resources as evidenced by the fact that Charlie had managed to get himself a job — delivering copies of the Daily Planet to various reporters. At first, Clark had been confused by that. After all, free copies of the paper were available in dispensers all over the building so why were people paying a quarter for a copy of the paper?

Until he discovered Charlie's genius.

The price was not for the paper; it was for delivery.

Soon Clark was on the list of employees paying a quarter for

delivery of the paper to his desk whenever Charlie was in the newsroom.

Pulling a quarter out of his pocket, he turned to look at Charlie, surprised when he didn't see his copy of the paper.

"This is for you," Charlie said looking unexpectedly nervous as he handed Clark an envelope.

Curious, Clark opened the envelope. Pulling out the hand-drawn card, he suspected the picture on it was done by Charlie. The writing clearly belonged to an adult, however — probably Molly — but Charlie had signed it. A handmade invitation to ... Clark smiled. A birthday party. Sunday afternoon at Chuck E. Cheese.

"Can you come?" Charlie asked.

Clark opened his mouth to accept before snapping it shut again. Lana's family had some big company function on Sunday afternoon. He had to attend. He couldn't do both.

He was about to refuse when he noticed the hope on Charlie's face as he waited for an answer.

"Of course I'll be there, kiddo. I love Chuck E. Cheese," Clark responded.

The smile that lit up Charlie's face was worth the hell he was going to get from Lana. Heck, getting in trouble from Lana for spending time with Charlie was pretty much to be expected these days — so why would this time be any different? But there was just something about Charlie that made Clark unable to deny him anything. He didn't even want to try.

With a spring in his step, Charlie turned away.

"Hey, wait!" Clark said.

Charlie turned back around.

"How old are you going to be?"

"Five," Charlie responded before bounding away.

June 1997

Charlie had turned five in August of 1993. That meant he'd been born in August of 1988. Which meant in turn that he had been conceived in ...

November 1987.

Charlie was his son.

Suddenly feeling slightly faint, he sunk onto one of the chairs at the conference room table.

Vaguely, he heard Perry saying his name, but he was already lost in another memory of the past.

December 25, 1994

Clark shifted the pile of presents in his arms in order to knock on the door. A moment later, he heard the door open — followed by laughter.

"Well, I have no idea who you are," Molly said. "But you've definitely come to the right place."

"Oh, sorry," Clark said, shifting the parcels slightly so that Molly could see more than a pile of presents.

"I should have known," Molly said when she saw the white beard and red toque. "Charlie, Santa's here to see you," she yelled before stepping back into the apartment to allow Clark to enter.

Clark placed his gifts on the bench just inside the door before bending down to remove his boots. He had just gotten them off when Charlie came rushing around the corner.

"That's not Santa. That's Uncle Clark in a Santa suit," Charlie said before launching himself into Clark's arms.

Clark laughed, catching the boy. "Guess I've been busted," he said. "And I've been working so hard on my ho, ho, ho, too. Hope you're not too disappointed I'm not the real Santa," Clark said, standing up and shifting Charlie onto his back so that he could again pick up the presents.

"You're better than the real Santa," Charlie said.

Clark beamed. If there were higher praise, he wasn't sure

he'd ever heard it.

"So is it just the two of you this year?" Clark asked, smoothing the new Santa tie Charlie had given him against his chest as he and Molly sat, sipping eggnog while watching Charlie play with his new toys, moving from one to the next as if wanting to play with all of them at the same time. During the past year and a half, he and Molly had become good friends, mainly because of their shared love for a certain little boy.

"Don't feel sorry for us," Molly said, glancing sideways at Clark. "Cat already came by earlier today and Perry and Alice were here for a while yesterday evening. Seems that you and Perry think alike because he showed up in a Santa suit, too. Well, so did Cat — although, her Santa costume was a little less ... traditional."

Clark laughed. Knowing Cat, he could imagine "No wonder you knew I was at the right apartment when you saw the suit — seems this is a popular spot for Santas."

"And Charlie is going to be spending some time with his grandparents later this afternoon."

"Uhh ... the doting grandparents. You'll be swamped in new toys when they get through with him," Clark said. Clark didn't know the details, but he knew there had been some kind of rift between Lois and her parents. That rift had even extended to include Charlie. All that had changed, however, when Lois had gone missing. Charlie now was one of the most important things in his grandparents' lives. Having Charlie seemed to help them bear the pain of losing their daughter just a little bit better.

"One thing Charlie isn't lacking is new toys," Molly said, gesturing around them.

Clark laughed. Between him and Molly and Cat and Perry, he suspected Charlie was one of the top toy-getters in Metropolis this Christmas — and that was even before his grandparents got hold of him.

"I'm surprised that the Lanes didn't invite you to join them," Clark said.

He was amazed to see Molly blush. "Actually, they did, but I have a date."

"Anyone I know?"

Molly shook her head. "Old friend from college."

"Well, have fun," Clark said, not inquiring further about the man's identity since, other than Cat who had apparently gone to school at the same time as Molly, he didn't know any of her friends from college. And besides, she seemed a little ... disinclined to talk about it.

"What about you? You and Lana have any special plans?"

Clark nodded. "A shindig over at the Lang residence."

"And for 'shindig' interpret 'soiree' — after all, it seems to me the Langs would never hold a shindig when they could have a soiree."

Clark laughed. "Well, it is black-tie. And when the Langs say black-tie ..."

"... they mean black-tie," Molly finished for him. "See ... I told you it weren't no shindig."

Clark laughed at Molly's butchered use of the English language.

"So how's that Gaagle thing of yours coming along?" Clark asked after a brief pause.

"It's up and running," Molly said, sounding pleased that he'd even remembered.

He supposed that made sense since the internet was still pretty small. Clark figured that would change soon enough.

"Starting to make some pretty good money, too," Molly said.

"Good. Maybe you can finally move into a bigger place."

"Actually, I've been considering that," Molly said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I think part of the reason I've stayed here so long is

that there's a part of me that still expects ... " She mouthed the word Lois to keep little ears from overhearing. "... to come walking in the door. And maybe I'm a little bit concerned if I move, she won't be able to find me."

"From what I know of ... " He glanced at Charlie. "... her, she'd find you even if she had to track you to the end of the earth."

Molly laughed. "Yes, she would."

Clark didn't inquire about her feeling that Lois might come waltzing in the door. After he'd first met Charlie, he'd taken many, many trips over to the Congo looking for a lead that might help him find Charlie's mother, but to no avail. These days, his investigation had shifted from looking for Lois to trying to find her killers — not that he'd told Molly that.

Of course, so far anyway, there wasn't much to tell. Whoever was responsible had gone far and hidden all the evidence deep. Still, someday, the case would crack and Clark intended to be there when it did. Both for Charlie's sake and for Molly's. Hopefully, if he could at least tell them what had happened to her, they would be able to get some closure. Until then ... Well, he wasn't sure it was healthy that Charlie still maintained that she would return — and from Molly's comments, it seemed she was having problems letting go as well.

"Well, anyway, any idea where you might move to? Have you considered buying a house?"

"Briefly, but ... Well, I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Sure," Clark said, wondering why she'd need to talk to him about her living arrangements — and then, suddenly dreading the idea that she was thinking of moving out of Metropolis, taking Charlie with her.

"I just discovered that the apartment building you're living in is up for sale and ... Well, maybe this is a crazy idea, but the first floor apartment the manager has been using is really spacious. I think I could really fix it up, make it a real home. I could even convert one of the other apartments on the first floor into an office for my computer equipment when one becomes available. And if I bought the building not only would I have a home, but another source of income."

"Can you afford it?" Clark asked, even as he breathed a sigh of relief that she wasn't thinking of leaving Metropolis.

"Like I said, Gaagle is really starting to pay off."

"Must be if you're talking about buying a whole apartment building. But why are you asking me about it?"

"Well, one of the reasons I'm considering it is because I think Charlie would love to be that close to you."

"I'd love it, too."

"Really?" Molly asked. "Because I was worried that you might think it was a little presumptuous of us. But you've become such a big part of his life this past year or so."

"Hey, I'd love it. That little guy is the best thing to ever happen to me."

"Better not let Lana hear you say that," Molly said with a laugh.

Clark cringed. "No, she wouldn't take kindly to that at all. And if you buy my building she will be convinced that we really are having an affair."

Molly's smile faded. "She thinks we're having an affair? Then maybe buying your building isn't such a good idea."

Clark shook his head. "Hey, don't let Lana stop you. I think it's a great idea. I can even watch Charlie for you when you're out with your mystery guy."

Molly rolled her eyes. "So you think I should do it?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay, then," Molly said, her smile returning. "I'll give the lawyers a call as soon as the holiday's over."

"So now that your Gaagle thing is doing so well, any other

projects in the works?"

Molly nodded. "I'm working on something I'm calling Headbook."

"What is that?"

"It's going to be ... sort of a social networking site. People will have their own page where their friends can come by and leave messages or where they can post pictures ... You know really make the internet a place where people can connect with each other." Molly shrugged. "I guess I just feel that technology is starting to separate people from each other and I am hoping this will allow people to reconnect again — even if it's not in person."

"Sounds like a good idea."

"And I've begun to play with another idea. I think I might call it 'mytube.' It would be a place for people to post their videos."

"Do enough people have video cameras to make that worthwhile?"

"Not yet," Molly said. "But that will change soon enough. Soon every one and their dog will be shooting videos and needing somewhere to post them."

Clark smiled. He wasn't sure how she did it, but when Molly made a prediction about the future of technology, one could pretty much bank on it coming true. So he suspected she must be right — even if he couldn't at the moment even imagine that being possible.

They watched Charlie play for a moment, each lost in their own thoughts.

"I just don't understand it," Clark said breaking the silence.

"What?"

"Well, he's such a great kid. How can any man walk away from his own child?"

Molly glanced over at him. "Sometimes things aren't quite what they seem."

That got Clark's attention. "How so?"

Molly hesitated for a long time before shaking her head. "Forget I said anything."

"Molly?"

She bit her lower lip, obviously struggling with something. "Let's go into the kitchen and get some more eggnog," she finally said.

Curious, Clark followed her into the kitchen, realizing that her motive was likely to keep Charlie from overhearing what she was about to say. Once they had changed rooms, he watched while she made sure that Charlie was engrossed in his play.

"Okay, so what is it?"

Still, Molly hesitated. "No, not now. Charlie seems to have really good hearing and ... I just don't want to take the chance. But I think someone needs to know ... I know I swore to his mother never to say anything, but if something were to happen to me, and then Charlie got sick and needed a donor or something ... I just think someone else needs to know. His grandparents should be here soon ... Will you stay until after they pick him up?"

Clark nodded. He had no idea what could be so serious that it could make Molly this paranoid about Charlie overhearing. But if she thought it was important, so did he.

"Uncle Clark," Charlie called. "Can you help me put my train set together?"

"Coming," Clark responded, giving Molly a quick smile before joining Charlie in the living room, certain as he did so that helping Charlie with his train set would be the best part of this year's Christmas.

The doors had closed behind Sam and Charlie leaving Molly and Clark alone in the apartment.

"What do you say to another glass of eggnog?" Molly asked.

He wasn't sure if it was because she wanted more eggnog or

if she was giving herself more time to figure out exactly what she wanted to say, but he went along with it, accepting a glass of eggnog and taking a seat on the couch as he waited.

She stared into space for a while, as if trying to find a way to begin. Then she surprised Clark by suddenly exclaiming, "Lois' slippers!"

"What?"

"Lois' slippers," she repeated, this time rising to her feet and crossing the room to pick up a pair of fuzzy slippers. "Why would Charlie have brought these out here?"

Clark shrugged.

Molly shook her head. "I'm sorry. Obviously, that's not what I wanted to talk to you about." She returned to her seat, seeming to puzzle over the slippers for a moment more before directing her mind to other matters.

"Over the past year and a half, you've become ... Well, you've become part of the family. And since I can never tell his real family ... I need to burden you with a secret — just in case something happens to me. But you have to promise me that you'll never tell anyone else unless Charlie's life is in danger."

"I promise," Clark said.

Molly searched his eyes for a moment before continuing. "When Lois got pregnant with Charlie, she was twenty years of age and in her first year at NTU. She told her parents that she'd had a one night stand with a guy who was visiting from out of town. That's the official story. And, you know, over the years, I think she almost managed to convince herself that that's what happened." She gave her head a shake, as if trying to get herself back on track.

"Her parents wanted her to get an abortion, but Lois refused. I don't think she ever really understood why, but almost from the first moment she realized she was pregnant, she was determined to have Charlie. It caused the rift between Lois and her parents. It even spilled over in their attitude to Charlie ... a rift that wasn't healed until Lois went missing.

"Not that they were completely wrong," Molly continued. "It was a hard time, back then. Lots of tears. Lots of venting. But Lois never took it out on Charlie. I wish she could have seen her parents' relationship with Charlie now ... She'd love it."

She fell silent again.

"You said that was the 'official story,'" Clark prompted when she didn't continue.

Molly nodded. "The unofficial story is ... Lois didn't know who Charlie's father was."

Clark's eyebrows rose.

"Oh, not like that," Molly said, rushing to correct the obvious assumption that Lois had been promiscuous. "Quite the opposite, actually. One night, we had a party at the Alpha Nu Rho house — that was our sorority — and someone slipped a date rape drug in her drink. I was the one who took her home that night and put her to bed. And we didn't think anything had happened until a couple months later when she found out she was pregnant."

"What?" Clark gasped.

"She didn't want Charlie burdened with the knowledge that he was the result of her being raped, so she came up with the other story. But ... Do you remember a story in late 1987 about Bob Stafford? It was Lois' first story in the Daily Planet."

"Yeah," Clark said. "It was the first big story about date rape drugs. Lois won her first Kerth for that story, didn't she?"

Molly nodded. "Well, she never knew if Stafford was Charlie's father, but ... I guess he's the most likely candidate. Although, I suppose it could have been someone else, just taking advantage of the situation. We never really discussed it in any detail and, of course, Lois never had blood tests or anything like that done because she was so intent on going with the cover story. But.. well, for Charlie's sake, I just thought someone should know."

Clark nodded slowly. "She must have loved Charlie a great deal."

Tears formed in Molly's eyes. "Yes, she did — and Charlie adored her. Charlie has asked questions over the years, of course, about his father. Lois used to tell him that his father was a wonderful man who wanted to be with them, but just couldn't." She studied Clark for a long moment. "You know ... I think I just figured out why you looked so familiar to me when we first met."

"Why's that?"

"Because ... well ... you and Charlie ... you have the same eyes. Hey, where were you in 1987?" she asked, playfully.

"I wish. I'd love to be his dad. But unfortunately, the first time I ever came to Metropolis was in 1993."

"Well, genetically, you may not be Charlie's dad, but in every way that matters ... He loves you as if you were."

Tears unexpectedly clouded Clark's vision. He wondered if Molly knew what she had just given him. When she got up and gave him a hug, he suspected she did. He wasn't sure he'd ever been given a better Christmas present.

June 1997

"But ... that makes no sense," Clark said, coming out of his memory. Not about the eye thing, of course. That made complete sense now that he knew. But ... the other thing. The paternity issue. "Lois would have known ... So would Molly, for that matter." After all, he'd overheard that telephone conversation between Lois and Molly the morning after they'd first made love. Lois might not have told Molly they'd made love, but Molly had certainly known. So why would Molly pretend that ...

But then, why hadn't Molly recognized him the moment he'd shown up at the Daily Planet?

"What did you say?" Perry asked.

"What? Huh?" He finally focused on Perry who was looking extremely worried. "Oh, no, Perry. I'm fine. I just ..."

"Zone out completely when you're not spouting nonsense or making dangerous revelations in the middle of the newsroom. Son, I think something is seriously wrong. And, I gotta tell you, you're scaring the hell out of me. What the Sam Hill is going on with you?"

"I'm fine," Clark repeated.

"You just don't know what the hell I'm talking about half the time. I swear, if I hadn't known it was impossible, when we were out there in the newsroom, I would have thought that you didn't know the whole Superman thing was a secret. It's almost as if you have amnesia or something."

Amnesia! Yes. Perfect. "Well, I sort of do," he said. "I mean, I remember parts of my life. But other parts ... I guess I'm still putting together the pieces."

"How did this happen? We need to get you to a doctor," Perry began wheeling towards the door.

"No!" Clark exclaimed, reaching out a hand to stop Perry's progress. "No, just ... I need your help."

"Anything, son. You know that."

Clark marshaled his thoughts. "Can you just ... help me by answering a few questions?"

"I can do that. What do you want to know?"

Clark was trying to figure out where to start when his eyes focused in on the wheelchair. "Okay, well, I know you were shot, but ... I guess seeing you here, in this ..." He gestured to the wheelchair. "How did this happen? Is this a permanent thing. And why are you at the Daily Planet? Aren't you the Mayor now? And for that matter, why hasn't Carpenter physically thrown me out of here, yet?"

"Well, to answer your last question first ... The only Carpenter I can think of is Preston Carpenter, the editor of that rag, The Star."

"Editor of The Star? But then, who's the editor of the

Planet?"

"You're looking at him."

"But ... how ... I thought you left the Daily Planet when you became Mayor."

"You really don't remember, do you?" Perry asked in concern. Then, instead of waiting for an answer, Perry launched into his explanation. "Well, yes. I was elected Mayor. But between then and the time that I was to take office, I got shot. So they had a new election and elected a new Mayor. I spent the next few months getting up and about. The new editor Olsen had hired didn't work out so when I was well enough, he asked me to come back to work."

"Is this wheelchair ..." Clark swallowed hard. "... permanent?"

"Hell no! I'm going to be up and on my own two feet in no time."

Clark finally smiled. Maybe he hadn't completely managed to destroy Perry's life. A lot of pain, yes. A lot of grief too. But ... maybe things weren't entirely hopeless.

"Besides, some good did come of it," Perry continued. "Alice and I are closer than we've been in years. I was starting to worry that we were headed towards a divorce. But this near-death experience brought us back together. Now we just have to work to keep things going. Almost losing everything makes you reevaluate your priorities."

"Hey," a woman said, sticking her head into the conference room.

Clark looked over and his eyebrows rose. "Cat? What are you doing here?" Or ... was it Cat? She looked older, certainly. And Molly had mentioned Cat coming by to see Charlie in 1994. But what really struck him was how professional she looked.

"I was wondering if you boys would like some coffee. After all, you've been stuck in here for a long time."

"That'd be great, Cat," Perry said. "Any fires out there that you can't put out?"

Cat shook her head. "Okay, I'll send someone in with that coffee." She stopped for a moment and looked at Clark. Then she gave her head a dismissive shake. "You know, it's crazy, but I still sometimes find myself wondering where I met you before you came to work for the Daily Planet." With that Cat walked out of the conference room, closing the door behind her.

"Naming her as my assistant was the best decision I've made since ... agreeing to print Lois Lane's first story."

"Assistant?" Clark asked, his head spinning.

"Well, she was getting bored with doing the gossip column so when I needed some help after the shooting, I thought I'd give her a shot. In fact, she's working out so well, I'm thinking that even once I'm back on my feet again, I'll keep her on. It will give me more time to spend with Alice and maybe I'll even start grooming Cat to take over when I retire eventually. Why? Don't tell me you don't remember Cat."

"I remember her, but ... I didn't even know she was working here. I thought she went to work for one of those Hollywood gossip shows — you know Entertainment Tomorrow or something."

Perry laughed. "Cat ... leave the Daily Planet? Not a chance. I think she might have been tempted when she was younger, but at the time she, Lois Lane and Molly Flynn were like the three musketeers. There was no way she was going anywhere. And later ... Well, I think she felt like this was home. And with Lois missing ... I think she worried that Charlie didn't need to lose another person from his life."

Clark's eyebrows rose. Huh. He hadn't seen that one coming.

"Does Linda King still work here?" Clark asked.

"Who?" Perry responded. "Wait! The name is vaguely familiar, but ..." He shook his head, unable to figure out where he'd heard that name before.

Clark smiled. That was one change he couldn't say he was going to mind. "No one important, I guess." Speaking of no one important, Clark suddenly found himself lost again in the past.

March 1995

Clark slapped the papers down on his desk in frustration. He'd finally managed to get all the paperwork after ... what? Almost two years. And it told him nothing. In a country in the midst of a civil war, there was no record of Lois Lane ever getting off the plane in Brazzaville. But given the shape these records were in, that wasn't exactly surprising.

Reaching over, he picked up the picture of Lois and Charlie sitting on his desk. A snapshot of Lois, wearing a halter top, looking at the camera and laughing while a much younger Charlie kissed her cheek. Clark couldn't help but smile in response. He had to admit, he loved this picture. He wished he had known her. That this could somehow be the picture he had placed on his desk. To be part of that happy family ...

"What the hell are you doing?"

Clark quickly placed the photo back on the desk and turned towards Lana. "Hi, Lana. What are you doing here?" he said, feeling guilty about where his thoughts had taken him.

"What am I doing here, he asks," Lana said in disbelief. "We were supposed to be meeting with my parents tonight. They want to talk about the wedding. You know — the wedding you never seem to want to talk about." She let out a breath. "Clark, you know how Daddy hates it when you're late. Yet here I am, having to track you down. And what do I find you doing? Mooning over a picture of a dead woman and her bastard son."

Clark sprang to his feet, grabbed her arm and practically marched her into the conference room, slamming the door behind him. "Don't, Lana. Don't ever say anything like that again!"

"Why not, Clark? I don't know why you insist on spending so much time with him! What's he to you?"

"He's an orphan, Lana," he responded. "I know what that's like. I guess I just feel ... some sort of connection to him. I can't explain it."

"Really? The way you act, you'd think you were his father."

"Now you're being ridiculous," Clark said. He was sick of this. Sick of fighting with Lana over the fact that he cared about a six year old child.

"Ridiculous? Really? What happens if we have children? If you can even give me children, that is — given that you're not exactly normal. Will you be there for your children or will you still be traipsing off after some other woman's child? What will you tell your own children when you are running off to watch Charlie play some stupid baseball game or something?"

"I'll take them with me," he said, disregarding her crack about his differences. "It's not a matter of either/or, Lana."

"I'm sick of it, Clark," Lana said, ignoring his response.

"Sick of it. You proposed two years ago; yet you never want to talk about wedding plans."

"I wanted us to get settled first," Clark said, even knowing as he did that she was right. The excuse was getting a little tired.

"It's not even as if you're prepared to move in together. Or ... to even make love."

"I want to wait until ..."

"... we're married. I bet you say that in your sleep. Not that I would know, of course." Her views on his position on waiting could be heard in the sarcasm in her voice. "If you were having to fight against your desire for me, maybe I could buy that. But you don't. It's like you've put us on hold. All your time and energy is spent fathering a boy that isn't even yours or looking for his mother who is probably worm food in Africa ..."

Clark flinched, hating that thought.

"This is it," Lana continued. "Daddy was going to talk to you about this tonight. But I'm not waiting for him to talk to you. I'm

putting my foot down. It ends now."

"Wait! What are you saying?"

"It's either him or me, Clark. You can't have both."

"You don't mean that. Lana. He's just a little boy."

"Him or me?" she insisted.

He stared at her for a moment, flabbergasted that he was being presented with this choice. One had nothing to do with the other. Or ... did it? Suddenly, he wasn't sure.

"Him or me?" she repeated.

"Him," he responded, almost more on instinct than conscious thought — almost as if it wasn't even a choice, he realized suddenly.

Lana froze for the briefest of seconds, seeming as startled as he was by his proclamation. Then she was moving.

"Fine!" she said, removing her ring and throwing it at him.

She stormed out the conference room, slamming the door behind her.

June 1997

"Clark?"

Clark blinked when he saw Perry snap his fingers in front of his face.

"You zoned out on me again. Are you sure we shouldn't call a doctor? Maybe he could ..."

"No, Perry. I just ... I'll be fine. Once I get things straight ... in here." He tapped his head.

"So what happened to cause these gaps in your memory?"

"It's ... complicated."

"I'm pretty good with complicated."

Clark stared at his friend for a moment. He really did need to talk to someone, but ... "I don't want to end up being carted off by men in white jackets," he said. "Because, believe me when I say the story is pretty unbelievable."

Just then the door opened and coffee was delivered to both Clark and Perry, along with a half box of donuts. They worked on fixing their coffee until the door finally closed, leaving them alone once again.

"Is your story more unbelievable than a mild-mannered reporter masquerading as a flying superhero?"

"Well ... Maybe."

Perry's eyebrows rose.

Clark pondered the situation for a moment more. "What would you say if I told you time travel is possible?"

Perry stared at him for a minute. "I'd say ... go on."

"Okay," Clark said before launching into his tale.

Perry leaned back in his chair, silently contemplating a nervous Clark as he digested what he'd just been told.

"Say something?" Clark begged.

"I'm not quite sure what you want me to say. I can tell you believe this, but ..." Perry shook his head. "I'm sorry, son. I just can't."

"What if I told you that I was waiting for Lois outside the Daily Planet when you bought her first story? It was a story about women on the NTU campus being in danger from someone who was drugging women. You paid her one hundred dollars for that story."

"You could know about the story and the amount I paid for it because you happened across it during your search for Lois years ago."

"But would I know that you originally offered her seventy-five dollars? She accepted and you told her she should have held out for more, but then you paid her a hundred dollars anyway."

"How ..."

"Or that you congratulated her for her story about the football players who were cheating on their exams? The story that was stolen from her by Linda King."

"That's why that name was familiar," Perry said. "I heard that King dropped out of school the next year. Never heard what happened to her after that."

"Really? So she never became a reporter?" Clark asked, momentarily distracted.

"Not that I ever heard. Of course, if she ended up at some small weekly, I might not have heard of her."

"Huh," Clark said, before giving his head a shake to get them back on track. "Then, if I hadn't gone into the past, how would I know about Linda King? Or how would I know that you insisted Lois call Molly for a direct quote about her behavior while under the influence of the GHB. Or that you yodeled when you walked back into your office."

Clark could tell that Perry was struggling to remember that last one.

"How do you know all this?" Perry finally asked.

"I told you ... I was outside the Daily Planet, waiting for her. She was excited when she left the Planet and talking a mile a minute." He smiled wistfully at the memory. Their first kiss had come after that. "Cat!" he suddenly said.

"What about her?"

"I met Cat in 1987. It was only once. But you heard her. She really thinks she met me before I came to work for the Daily Planet. That's because she did. Back in 1987. Although, I don't understand why Molly didn't recognize me. I only met Cat once, but I spent quite a bit of time with Molly. But ... Henderson. When I first met him in 1993, he seemed to think he'd met me before, too."

"You really did go into the past, didn't you?"

Shocked by Perry's sudden acceptance, Clark couldn't help asking his question. "What convinced you?"

"Everything ... but most of all that you gave me all the information — even those things that don't back up your claim."

"Then tell me something ... When I got here, you asked about me shaving my beard off."

"Right."

"Why the heck had I grown a beard in the first place?"

"If you went into the past to the time Lois submitted her first story ... " His voice trailed off and he seemed to be thinking hard for a moment. "Wait a second ... are you Charlie's father?"

Clark nodded, not entirely sure how Perry had made that leap. The timing perhaps. Or maybe it was just the way he'd spoken about Lois when telling Perry about his adventure. "But I didn't know until now."

"Obviously, since until you went into the past, you wouldn't have had a son ... Am I the only one getting a headache here?"

Clark smiled.

"So then before you went into the past, Charlie wasn't here ... " Perry continued, suddenly putting some pieces together for himself. "Of course you didn't know about the beard! No wonder you shaved it off."

"What does that mean?"

"Clark, do you know anything about your relationship with Charlie? I mean, before you realized he was your son."

"I know I've always felt ... a connection with him. Why?"

"Well, his class at school had a charity fund raising event that required that each child's father grow a beard to raise money for underprivileged children."

"You say that people don't know I'm Superman, right?"

Clark waited for Perry to nod before continuing. "If people don't know I'm Superman, how could I have volunteered to grow a beard?"

"You couldn't say no to Charlie," Perry said, finding that fact amusing. "He's had you wrapped around his little finger since you met."

"Then how did I deal with the Superman issue?"

"Well, since you couldn't say no to Charlie, Superman

decided that he just had to be part of this charity fund-raiser, too."

"But the association that would make between Superman and Charlie ... "

"Superman claimed he was there for all the children. He had apparently learned about it from reading an article Clark wrote for the Planet and thought it was a great cause."

"And now I have to explain why both Clark and Superman shaved off their beards?" Clark asked in distress.

"You could always claim you both got lice," Perry said with a laugh.

"You're a lot of help," Clark groaned.

"Don't worry. We'll think of something."

Perry fell silent for a minute, lost in contemplative thought. "I know Lois went missing before you came to the Daily Planet, but wouldn't she have told Molly or ... someone if you were Charlie's father? Told them that there was a man out there named Clark Kent who should be notified if something happened to her."

"I don't understand it either. I mean, I told her that I would be coming to work at the Daily Planet in 1993. So she should have told someone. But she must not have. Molly couldn't possibly have kept this a secret all this time."

"Well, so then why did you go into the past? You wouldn't have met Lois since you came here after she died. There was no Charlie for you to want to help. So what motivated you to go into the past?"

Clark took a deep breath before launching into his story about alternate dimensions and an alternate Lois Lane, expecting that this final story would convince Perry that he was crazy even if the story about time travel hadn't. When he finished, he looked at Perry, waiting for his reaction.

"That's not how I remember it," Perry said.

"What?"

This time, Perry was the one telling a story and as he did, Clark's memory caught up to him.

January 1996

"Clark!"

Clark glanced up from the papers he was studying to see a woman practically flying across the room and ... into his arms.

"Oh, Clark, I'm so glad to see you. You and Superman," she added on a whisper before kissing him dead on the lips.

Gently, he pushed her away. "Who are you, Miss? And why are you ... " His voice trailed off. "Lois Lane?" he finally asked. "Is that you?"

Lois looked at him, appearing dumbfounded, almost as if she'd expected immediate recognition.

Lois Lane ... Suddenly, the significance of this really sank into Clark's mind. "Lois, it is you, isn't it?"

"Uhh ... yeah. I just ... "

"This is great! Does Charlie know yet? He must be beside himself. Where have you been? I swear, I looked for you everywhere. I really didn't think Charlie was right, but he has always maintained that you were coming back. He never gave up hope."

"Uhh ... Charlie who?"

"Charlie ... your son." Her eyebrows rose but otherwise she just stared at him. "You remember Charlie, don't you?"

"I have a son?" she asked. Suddenly, the ramifications of this development seemed to sink in. "Oh, god ... It's one thing to let Perry believe that his Lois has returned, but I can't let her son think she has risen from the dead."

"You're an impostor?" Clark gasped. "What's your game? What type of fraud are you trying to perpetrate anyway?" He stepped away from her. "I'm calling the cops."

"No, wait. At least hear me out ... And Perry. We need Perry, too. And Jimmy Olsen. After all, if they don't know, I suspect it's possible that they might say something to ... What was his name

again? Charlie?"

Clark nodded.

"Please. Just ... hear me out."

He stared at her for a long moment before nodding.

"It's not a ski suit," Lois said, pulling the blue ski suit out of a bag. "I mean ... it is. But it's more than that. It's a symbol. You're making yourself into a beacon."

"Are you always like this?" Clark asked.

"Sorry. I'm a little high-strung."

"Lady, you're a Stradivarius."

"Maybe this will help," Lois said, pulling out her wallet. She opened it and passed it over to him. "That's what I'm talking about," she said while he stared down at a picture of himself in a pair of blue tights with a large 's' symbol on his chest, red briefs, red boots and a cape.

"That's ... what I'm afraid of," Clark said, looking at the photo. He flipped to another photo and stared at it. "Is that ... us?" he asked, seeing a photo of Lois with a man who was identical to him.

"Well, it's me and him"

"Are we ... ?"

She held up her hand, showing him the sparkling engagement ring on her finger.

"Oh, wow," he breathed. His heart's desire. Him and Lois Lane. Not this Lois Lane, of course. But the one whose picture he looked at every morning when he sat down at his desk. The one he had gotten to know by talking to her friends and reading her work. The one whose son, Charlie, he loved as if he were his own child.

Suddenly, things came into sharp focus. "Okay, I understand what you're saying, Lois. I really do. And I can see the value of it. But I need to think about this before I reveal myself to the world."

"But you wouldn't be revealing yourself to the world," Lois objected. "People aren't going to associate the mild mannered reporter with the world-famous superhero. Trust me."

"You may be right. But I can't just jump into this without thinking it through. I won't let Tempus kill Perry White. But I still say we call the police, get them involved."

"But, Clark ..."

"I can't, Lois. I have responsibilities here and I have to think through them before doing something this drastic."

"What responsibilities?"

"Charlie."

"Lois' son?"

Clark nodded. "Since his mother died, I've been ... well, like a father to him. If I put on a costume and start flying around putting bad guys behind bars, and if anyone ever found out that it was Clark Kent doing these things, Charlie would be in danger."

"But, Clark ..."

"I'm not saying I won't do it," Clark said. "I'm saying. I need to think this through. For now ... I say we use the police."

She studied his face for a long moment before reaching into her wallet to remove the picture of Superman. "For when you decide that you're ready," she said, placing the photo on his coffee table.

"Thank you," he said. "Now ... as for stopping Tempus ..."

June 1997

"I remember," Clark said, suddenly understanding why no one knew that Clark Kent and Superman were the same person. He hadn't put on the suit when the other Lois had first asked him to and as a result, hadn't walked right into Tempus' plan to expose him. Without that, they'd been able to discount the video of Clark catching Lois when she'd fallen off that building and the world had become convinced that Tempus was crazy with his talk

of aliens living amongst them.

And then, when Clark had been ready, he'd put on the suit, taking to the skies in a way and manner that had preserved his civilian identity.

That had changed other things, too. Spending time with a real, live version of a Lois Lane had only consolidated his feelings for Charlie's mother. So when Wells had left the blueprints for his time travel machine in Clark's apartment, he'd felt he had no choice but to go back, for Charlie and for himself — even if it were just to meet her, to know if he'd built her up in his mind or if she truly was his soulmate the way the other Clark was the other Lois' soulmate. Even if he wasn't, he would do anything to give Charlie's mother back to him.

"So your memories ... what?" Perry asked. "They readjust to fit the present reality now that you're back in your own time?"

Clark nodded. "I still have my old memories, but I'm starting to get the memories of the things I've changed, too."

"One thing I don't understand ... If you went into the past and got close enough to Lois to have a son with her. And if you were able to change things ... Why didn't you tell her not to go to the Congo?"

"I did, Perry. She promised me that she wouldn't."

"So what happened?"

Clark reached into his pocket, withdrawing the letter Lois had written and handing it to Perry.

"So ... " Perry said soberly when he finished reading the letter. "She really is gone."

Clark nodded, fighting against the feeling of finality Perry's words evoked.

April 1993

Lois settled back into her seat on the plane and relaxed. The seat next to her was empty now — the passenger who had occupied it having exited the plane in Rome. She was grateful. If she'd been forced to listen to one more story about that woman's grandchildren, she'd have been compelled to take drastic action. The woman had talked non-stop about them almost from the moment they had departed Metropolis.

Letting her mind drift, she saw again the face of the man who had tried to prevent her from boarding this flight. What had been his problem, anyway?

But there was something about him ... Something about his eyes that seemed familiar to her. Her eyes popped open as it suddenly occurred to her why those eyes had looked so familiar. He had the same eyes as Charlie.

She was pulled out of her thoughts when someone began to move into the free space next to her. Damn. She had hoped that she'd have this space to herself for the next leg of the journey. Well, maybe she could avoid conversation.

"Uhh ... yes. I believe this is my seat," the man said.

Glancing over at him, she gave him a polite smile, but one that she hoped didn't invite further discourse. She did a double take when she noticed his well tailored suit and puffy tie. So old fashioned. He looked as if he'd stepped out of a movie set from the late 1900s. And that bowler hat ... Where had that come from?

"Oh, dear. I'm really not sure what to do with this," the man said once he sat down.

Lois glanced over at him, curious about what had him so baffled. The seat belt? Who didn't know how to operate a seat belt? Maybe he was the guy the flight crews were addressing when they gave their stupid seat belt demonstration at the beginning of every flight.

"You just ... " Lois said, in spite of her resolve to avoid conversation. Instead of explaining with words, she demonstrated with her seatbelt.

"Oh, quite ingenious," the man said, attaching his seatbelt. "Someone really should patent this invention. I can see it could

have lots of wonderful uses.”

Lois glanced over at him, his bespectacled face, his dark moustache — who was this man? “I’m sure someone has,” she said, again unable to stop herself.

“Oh, quite. Of course. Still, wonderful invention. Wonderful.”

They were silent as the crew went through its normal routine and the airplane began taxiing down the runway. As it sped up to take to the air, Lois heard the man next to her.

“Oh my. Oh my. Oh my. Oh my,” he said as they left the ground. He took a moment to catch his breath before speaking again. “That was quite an adventure. I didn’t imagine it would be like that at all. Being pushed back into my seat. And then, sort of this floaty feeling.”

Lois turned to look at him. “Who are you?” she blurted out.

“Herbert George Wells,” the man said, taking off his bowler cap and, after looking around for a moment as if expecting to find a hat rack, laying it on his lap. “We’ve met before, Ms. Lane. Although I doubt you remember.”

She glanced at him again. Now that he mentioned it, there was something familiar about him.

“I’m going to tell you a story. And as I do, you will begin to remember, like a dream recalled. So close your eyes and let the images unspool,” he said before launching into his tale.

As he spoke, the memories of those days in November 1987 came back to Lois, one after another, starting slowly and then faster and faster in rapid succession. And with the memories came the feelings. Excitement. Wonder. Trust. Loss. Pain. And most of all ... Love.

“Clark,” she breathed as her head started to spin. She leaned forward, putting her head down in hopes of fighting off the threatening darkness.

“Miss ...” Wells called.

Lois didn’t know if he was speaking to her or not. Not that it made much difference. She was in no condition to respond.

“Could we get a wet cloth, please?” Wells asked.

“Certainly,” a woman said.

A moment later, a cool cloth was being pressed into Lois’ hands. She dabbed her face with it, still lost in thought. Clark. How could she have forgotten? Meeting Clark. Making love to Clark. Marrying Clark.

And then there were those photos. Those ones she still looked at occasionally, wondering why she’d kept a picture of a black streak across a clear blue sky and the corner of someone’s face. The ones she still couldn’t bring herself to throw out.

Her guardian angel ...

Charlie ...

Suddenly, understanding flooded her. Clark was Charlie’s father. She never had been raped. It all made sense now. The reason she’d never even considered abortion. Her love for her son had been a natural extension of the love she had for his father.

She smiled slightly when she remembered how his name had come to her when she’d first seen Charlie after his birth. Or how she’d never had the least bit of desire to date. Her conscious mind might not have remembered, but in her subconscious mind she was married to a man she adored. Her husband. A slow smile lit up her face. Her super guy was out there, just waiting for her. She could hardly wait to tell Charlie about his father.

The smile faded as the rest of it came back — the reason she’d agreed to forget. But she had agreed to that before Charlie. Now that she had him, how could she ... But how could she not? After all, the stakes were so much higher now. If she didn’t do this, Charlie’s world would be destroyed too.

For him to live, she had to die.

She suddenly wished she could go back to blissful ignorance.

“Why tell me now?” she demanded, finally looking again at the man seated next to her. “Why let me remember when I’m on

my way to the Congo where ...” She felt tears congregate in her eyes. “If I have to die anyway, why tell me now?”

“You don’t have to die,” Wells said. “You just have to stop living in 1993. Today, in fact.”

Today. The word hit hard. The last day of her life. “Isn’t that what I just said?”

“Not exactly,” Wells said. “You can’t continue living in 1993 because if you do, you will create a paradox. But I can take you somewhere where you won’t create a paradox.”

“Where?” Lois asked.

“The future, Ms. Lane.”

Lois’ heart started pounding. “When?”

“1997.”

“But I thought ...”

“If you go to the future, to a time after Clark returned to 1997, it won’t change his past. Tempus would still have brought me to this dimension. Clark would have gone into the past already. The paradox would be avoided.”

“But then ... why not take me to the future with Clark back in 1987?”

“Because of the damage it would have done to the past if you’d left in 1987. No, you had to live those six years — and to live them without any knowledge of the future — if we wanted to ensure the stability of the time line. So, Ms. Lane, what do you say? Will you allow me to take you to the future?”

“Yes. Absolutely. We just have to get Charlie and ...”

“He can’t come.”

“But ... I can’t leave Charlie behind.”

“You have no choice. Charlie is Clark’s son, I assume.”

Lois nodded.

“Any changes his birth made to the past have already worked their way past Clark’s time. He survived that. We can’t know what repercussions could come from removing him from the equation now.”

“But ...”

“Besides, Ms. Lane, it is one thing for a twenty-five year old to go four years into the future. After all, there’s not much difference between a twenty-five year old and a twenty-nine year old. Taking a four year old four years into the future ... There is a world of difference between a four year old and a eight year old. His birth certificate will say he’s eight. How will you get him into the right class in school ... or are you going to put him into third grade when he should be going into kindergarten? He’s a bright kid, but he’s not ready to be in third grade.

“And how would you explain to everyone you know the fact that he disappeared in 1993, only to reappear four years later without aging a day? We can’t allow the world to know about time travel. Think how dangerous time travel would be if it fell into the wrong hands. And if they thought they could get that knowledge from you, do you really think they would hesitate for a second to use Charlie to get that information?”

“I can’t leave him.”

“What is better for him? To lose you for four years or to lose you permanently?”

Tears formed in Lois’ eyes. “You’ve been to the future, right? Seen the way it will be if I disappear today?”

“Yes.”

“Then tell me ... will Charlie be okay?”

“He misses his mother. But he has a lot of people who love him. Perry. Molly. Cat. Lucy. Your parents.”

“My parents?” Lois’ eyebrows rose.

“Quite so. It seems that when you went missing, it caused them to reevaluate ... certain things. The relationship they will establish with Charlie will become that of attentive and loving grandparents. I think they see something of you in Charlie. Having him around makes the pain of your loss ... slightly more bearable. And ... in a couple of months ... Charlie will meet his

father.”

“Clark’s in his life? But ... if Clark hasn’t been to the past yet, how does he know he’s Charlie’s father?”

“He doesn’t. But it’s the most remarkable thing. Clark doesn’t know, but he senses something ... kindred about Charlie. Charlie senses it, too. They’ve bonded. Clark has become his father in all but name.”

“So he’ll have Clark during the years I can’t be there?”

“He will. So ... will you come with me?”

The plane touched down in Casablanca, jolting them both out of their discussion.

“Ms. Lane, you have to make up your mind now. If we are going to do this, we have to do it in Casablanca. Clark will be waiting when this plane arrives in Brazzaville. And if you get off the plane there, he won’t let you out of his sight.”

“I ...” Lois’ attention was distracted by the sight of someone a few rows in front of them, standing up to get his things out of the overhead rack. He looked familiar, but she couldn’t quite place him. He turned in her direction and for a moment, their eyes locked. He quickly looked away, keeping his head down and pushing past people in an effort to get to the exit.

Lois sprang to her feet, intent on following.

“Ms. Lane. What are you doing? Are you coming with me or not?”

“That was Ryan Wiley,” Lois hissed. “He’s supposed to be dead. So what the hell is he doing on this plane?”

She grabbed her carry-on from the overhead compartment.

“Ms. Lane, please. What are you doing?”

“I’m following Ryan.”

“You can’t. We have to go to the future.”

“I have to know why Ryan is pretending to be dead. And what the hell he is doing on this plane?”

“Have you considered the fact that this might well be how you got in trouble in the first place?”

Lois turned to look at him then, a question on her face.

“When Clark and I originally came back to 1993, Clark met your plane in Brazzaville. You weren’t on it. We had no idea why you would have gotten off the plane. But you were never heard from again. Have you considered that originally you might have followed Mr. Wiley and he killed you?”

Lois stopped, thinking about that for a moment. “You think Ryan killed me?”

“Can you think of another reason you would have gotten off the plane before Brazzaville?”

She couldn’t. “Still, I have to know. Why is Ryan here? Why is he pretending to be dead? Why did he send Molly that horrible letter? I have to find out. For Molly, I have to know.”

“But, Ms. Lane ...”

“Besides, this time is different. This time I know I’m in danger and I have you for backup.”

“I really must advise against this,” Wells said when Lois grabbed his arm and began dragging him towards the exit. “This is not a good idea.”

June 1997

Clark stood outside the first floor apartment at 344 Clinton Street, looking over his glasses at the boy sitting at a desk, diligently doing his homework.

His son.

Wow!

Tears formed in his eyes as he watched the child from the darkened street. He’d loved the boy for the past four years without knowing. But now ... knowing ... Maybe his trip into the past hadn’t been a total failure if it had produced something so beautiful, so precious.

His deliberation was interrupted when Molly walked between Clark and his son. Clark blinked.

Molly. She had to have known — which, of course, begged the question of why she hadn’t told him. He’d spent enough time with Molly in 1987 that she had to have recognized him when he arrived at the Daily Planet in 1993. So, even if she had worried that he might think she was crazy if she had claimed Charlie was his son, it didn’t explain why she had told him that story about Lois being the victim of a date rape drug.

It didn’t explain why Lois, if she was heading to the Congo having accepted her fate, wouldn’t have left a letter for him, telling him about his son.

Well, he wasn’t going to get any answers by standing out here. If he couldn’t ask Lois, there was someone else who might be able to help him understand.

He knocked at Molly’s apartment. It only took a moment for Molly to open the door.

“Hey, Clark. Where the hell have you been? No, wait. That doesn’t matter. You need to see Charlie. He’s been worried sick about you.” She turned, as if to call Charlie for him.

“No, wait,” Clark said, touching her arm to ensure she stopped. “Tell Charlie I’m back, but ... we need to talk alone first.”

“Sure. What’s up?”

Clark opened his mouth before snapping it shut again. He glanced towards Charlie’s room. “Not here. Why don’t you come up to my apartment?”

“Sure. Just let me tell Charlie you’re back and will talk to him later.”

Clark handed Molly a cup of coffee before they settled in the living room. He knew she was curious, but he’d needed time to figure out how to approach the topic. He finally decided on the direct approach.

“Why didn’t you tell me that I’m Charlie’s father?”

He had to jump up and tap Molly’s back when she choked on the sip of coffee she’d been taking. Maybe the direct approach hadn’t been the right way to do this, after all. On the other hand, it was out there now where they could deal with it.

“Excuse me?” Molly managed to choke out when she finally caught her breath.

“You know I love that boy,” Clark said, assuming she hadn’t really needed clarification on his question. “So why tell me that story about Lois being raped? Was it because you didn’t think I’d believe you?”

“What?”

“Okay, I can understand that the time travel thing might have been a little ... difficult to accept. But why not just say that Lois had sworn you to secrecy? Why make up that story about the date rape drugs?”

“Make up a story?” Molly asked.

“Come on, Molly. You must have recognized me when I showed up at the Daily Planet. And I know you were aware of what happened between Lois and me ... Or at least some of it. I heard you two on the phone the next morning. Even if Lois hadn’t told you Charlie was mine, you must have had your suspicions.”

“Wait a minute!” Molly objected. She hesitated, as if trying to make sense of what he’d said. “What the hell are you talking about?” she finally asked.

It suddenly occurred to Clark that Molly honestly had no idea what he was talking about.

“How is it you don’t remember?” he asked.

“Remember what?”

“Molly, I ...”

“Is it true?”

Molly and Clark’s heads snapped up as they looked towards the door, seeing Charlie standing there.

“Is it true?” Charlie asked again.

"Is what true?" Clark asked.

"Are you really my dad?"

Clark pulled in a breath. His son's hearing was obviously beginning to kick in. He'd probably heard every word he and Molly had said since coming up here. Well, so much for deciding how to break the news to Charlie.

"Charlie ..." Molly began, only to be cut off by Clark.

"It's really true," Clark said, deciding that the best approach was the truth. "I'm your dad."

"Clark, don't ..." Molly warned, obviously trying to tell him not to confuse Charlie.

"It is true, Molly," Clark said. "I don't know why you don't remember, but a friend of mine invented a time machine and I traveled into the past. That's why I haven't been around this past week ... or, well, sort of. Anyway, during the time I was there, Lois ..." He glanced over at Charlie who had quietly pushed the door closed behind him and was moving, almost silently, towards them. "... your mother and I fell in love. We even got married. And we had you."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Charlie asked.

"I didn't know," Clark said.

"How could you not know?" Molly asked.

"I just went into the past a week ago. I didn't know that I was Charlie's father until then."

Suddenly, remembering the marriage certificate, he pulled it out and handed it to Molly. She studied it, looking up at him several times, obviously not sure what to make of it. She gave up the certificate when Charlie came over, tugging it out of her stunned hand to look at it himself.

"Do that magic you do with your computer if you want to, Mol. Research it. See if this marriage was filed with the government in 1987. I promise you, you'll find out that it's real. I showed up the night of the party at the Alpha Nu Rho house. I was the one who stopped the football players who were attempting to take Lois from the party. I found you and together we took her back to her dorm room."

"That was you?" Molly asked.

"So you're really my dad?" Charlie asked again, tears now in his eyes.

"I'm really your dad," Clark said, a smile splitting his face. When his son threw himself into his arms, tears congregated in Clark's eyes as well. Holding Charlie tight in his arms, he closed his eyes and kissed the boy's hair.

"You and Lois eloped!" Molly suddenly said, her eyes opening wide as the memories began to return. "I remember you. But then ... how did I forge ..." Her voice trailed off and she seemed to be putting even more pieces together. "Wells did it. He had a machine ... the Hummer-Be-Gone, he called it. Something about the world being destroyed by a paradox unless we forgot everything."

"What?"

"That's why we agreed to do it. That's why Lois wrote you that letter. I assume you got the letter?"

"You know about the letter?"

Molly nodded. "It was Lois' idea. She was worried that you'd try to go back in time again to rescue her. So she wrote the letter and then our memories were erased. Or ... well, obviously not completely erased ... maybe suppressed would be a better word.

"No wonder Lois never dated. She might not have remembered you at a conscious level, but on a subconscious level ... I don't think she ever completely forgot. I think some part of her always knew that she was married to you.

"Oh, god. It also explains comments some of the girls made at about that time," Molly continued. "Especially Cat. She used to say things like, 'Where's the tight-end?' She never actually said anything that connected it to Lois' pregnancy though. She probably wasn't sure she should say anything since she was one

of the people who knew that Lois had been drugged at about the same time. But still ... I can hardly believe we didn't follow up on that."

"On the other hand," Clark said, "maybe it's better that you didn't. Otherwise, it would be easier to believe I'd taken advantage of Lois while she was drugged than to believe that a dead fiction writer named H.G. Wells erased your memories."

"True." Suddenly, Molly smiled. "Lois was right about you. You always see the silver lining, don't you?"

A knock at the door interrupted them. For a moment, Clark was tempted not to answer. Still, his folks had raised him better than that. Releasing his son, and after taking a moment to brush the tears off the boy's face, Clark walked to the door, intending to get rid of his visitor as quickly as possible. There was still so much he needed to know.

He opened the door and froze.

"Clark," the woman standing outside the door said before throwing herself into his arms.

"Lois," Clark responded the instant before their lips met.

Lois had never known a sensation like it. Kissing Clark had always been good, powerful even. But this was different. This was ... more. The first rain after six years of drought. The first Double Fudge Crunch Bar after six years of dieting. Coming home after wandering for six years in the wilderness.

The moment where past and future finally met, healing the pain and struggle of the previous years, making every tear make sense and answering every question. As lips probed and hands roamed, Lois felt a warmth and belonging flood her system. Home. She was finally home.

"Mommy?" Charlie asked, speaking the only word that could possibly pull Lois out of Clark's arms.

Lois released Clark as her eyes sought out her son. Tears clouded her vision when she spotted him. Her four year old child was now an eight year old boy. Yet in his reversion to the word 'mommy', she heard the child she had left behind.

"Mommy!" Charlie exclaimed, throwing himself into her open arms, practically knocking Lois off her feet as tears accompanied laughter. "I knew," Charlie said. "I knew you'd come home. You promised."

Clark carried the sleeping child down the stairs. They'd all talked for hours, filling each other in on what had transpired. Lois had explained that Wells had come into the past, meeting her on the plane and offering her the chance to come forward into the future.

Molly and Clark had filled her in on the events of the past four years. And Clark explained to Charlie why he'd shaved off his beard — and promising to grow it back as quickly as possible.

Charlie had curled up against his mother, eventually falling asleep. Rather than waking the emotionally exhausted boy, Clark had gathered his son into his arms to take him down to his room, Lois following close behind.

While carrying his son down to the first floor, Clark noted that Lois seemed unable to quit touching him. His arms. His back. His butt. All of it was open season to her wandering hands.

And Clark was loving every second.

While Lois stood in the doorway to her son's room watching, Clark made judicious use of his superpowers to change Charlie into his pajamas and tuck him into bed. He gently kissed Charlie's forehead before turning towards Lois. He found himself stumbling when he caught sight of the depth of love on her face. The years she'd lived since meeting him had seemingly done nothing to change her feelings.

She held out her hand. Giving her a smile, he walked closer, taking her hand and pulling her to him for a kiss. This kiss was soft as they sought and received answers from each other.

Luxuriating in the moment while still unexpectedly feeling the promise of so much more to come.

"So do I take this to mean you still want to be married to me?" Clark asked, breaking the kiss in order to rest his forehead against hers.

"I told you back when I asked you to marry me that I know my own mind. And, Clark Kent, what I want is for you to be my husband. I've never wanted anything more." With that, she pulled him back in for another kiss, exploring his mouth in a way that left him in no doubt of her feelings ... or her intentions.

"Mom?"

Lois pulled back, giving Clark an apologetic look. He just smiled, giving a slight jerk of his head to silently tell her to tend to her son. He could wait. "I should really take a trip to a drug store anyway," Clark said.

A slow grin spread across Lois' face as his meaning sunk in. "Thinking you might get lucky?"

"Hoping," Clark responded.

"Hurry back," she whispered, giving him a quick kiss. When he left the room, she turned back to Charlie.

"Yes, kiddo," Lois said, taking a seat on the side of her son's bed and mussing his hair.

"Are you ... are you going to be here tomorrow?"

"Absolutely! I'm not going anywhere ... Well, except maybe up to Clark ... your father's apartment. That would be okay, wouldn't it?"

"Are you going to sleep with Uncle Clar ... Dad?"

Lois cocked her head to her side, unsure how to handle this. There had never been any men in her life and so she'd never had to deal with anything remotely similar. But what exactly did he mean? There was quite a difference, after all, between sleeping with someone and ... sleeping with someone.

"Would that bother you?" she asked, watching him carefully in hopes of understanding what he was asking.

He shrugged. "Bobby's mom and dad sleep in the same bed." His voice trailed off. "Is Clark really my dad?"

Lois smiled. "Yes. He is, kiddo." Maybe those deeper questions weren't what he was wondering about at all. She felt relieved. Hopefully, it would be a few more years before she would have to answer those types of questions.

"And he only found out this week?"

Lois nodded. When Charlie still looked troubled, Lois spoke again. "But if you think about it, that's pretty cool. He decided he wanted to be part of your life, not because he was your dad, but because he realized what a great kid you are."

"Yeah," Charlie said when that thought sunk in. "And now he's my dad, too."

"Now he's your dad, too."

"And you're going to stay?"

"I'm not leaving either one of you. You have my promise."

Charlie yawned.

"You need to get to sleep," Lois said, leaning over to kiss his forehead before rising from the side of the bed.

"Can I get something to drink?"

Lois hesitated. "Do you think that's a good idea? To have something to drink just before going to bed?"

"Mom, I'm not a little kid anymore," Charlie said, sounding offended.

Lois smiled. "You'll always be my little boy."

"Mom," Charlie groaned.

"Okay, I'll go get you something to drink," Lois said, before turning out the light and leaving the room.

She walked into the living room to see her friend sitting there. Molly looked up and smiled when she entered.

"I can't tell you how good it is to have you back," Molly said. She gestured towards Charlie's room. "He never gave up hope,

you know. I think he always knew you were coming back."

"Well, I might have sort of had something to do with that," Lois said.

Molly's eyebrows rose.

"When Wells and I got to 1997, he wanted to come right here. But I couldn't. I couldn't just leave Charlie behind without an explanation, and without being sure he really would be okay, and Wells did have a time machine so ..."

April 1993

Lois materialized in the darkened room and stood for a long time, watching the sleeping child. Then, on almost silent feet, she crossed the floor, carefully pulled back the blankets and crawled into bed. Charlie turned, curling into her body.

"Hi, Mommy," he slurred.

Lois wrapped her arms around her son, gently kissing his hair.

"Are you home?" Charlie asked.

"No, kiddo. I can't come home yet. But I promise, I'll be home as soon as I can. Okay?"

"Okay," Charlie said, still mostly asleep.

"And I promise you that I'll be looking in on you from time to time to make sure you're doing okay before I can come home for good."

A soft snore met this pronouncement.

She closed her eyes, silent tears slipping down her cheeks. She waited until she was certain he was sound asleep before again leaving the bed. Then, after taking one last look at her sleeping child, she pressed the controls on the time machine.

June 1997

"I dropped in a dozen times, just like that, over the years. To check in on him, make sure he was okay. I made sure to only come after I was sure he wouldn't really wake up. Maybe just enough to know I was here, looking out for him."

"The slippers!" Molly said. "The slippers that showed up magically one Christmas morning."

"The slippers," Lois confirmed. "I couldn't leave him alone on Christmas eve. I just couldn't. So ... well, I spent the night, curled up with him in his bed. You have no idea how close you came to catching me that morning. I had to disappear right out of my slippers ... literally. But I didn't dare let you see me. I didn't want to jeopardize the time line any more than I already was."

"But, Molly, I want you to know that even if I hadn't been able to come back ... You did a great job with him. I can't thank you enough for that," Lois said. "I think one of the best things I ever did was making friends with you."

Molly smiled, obviously pleased.

"Charlie is wanting something to drink," Lois said, changing the subject.

"There's juice in the fridge."

"Thanks," Lois said before turning towards the kitchen.

Walking over to the fridge, she opened it and began looking for the juice when her eyes spotted something else. The color drained from her face when she realized what she was seeing. A six-pack of Golden Springs Beer.

Forgetting about the juice, she rushed back into the living room. "Molly, what is a six-pack of Golden Springs Beer doing in your fridge?" she asked.

Molly instantly tensed. "I know what you're thinking, Lois."

"Oh, I don't think you do."

"Ryan never actually died. He's had to pretend to be dead because of some sort of hush-hush government, protect the world, sort of thing. But he's changed."

"He's back in your life?" Lois asked, still struggling to come to terms with this development.

"He comes by when he can, but ..."

"Molly, he's bad news."

"He was just a kid when we were in university. He's different now. He's grown up."

"Different since he tried to kill me?" Lois asked, before launching into the rest of the story about her last day in 1993.

April 1993

At first Lois was concerned that they'd lost Ryan. She hadn't seen him anywhere since they'd disembarked the plane. Then she spotted him. He'd stopped to place a phone call. She wished she were close enough to overhear him. Making sure she was hidden by the crowds around her, she watched while he hung up the phone and headed down a nearby hallway.

"Stay here," she hissed at Wells, handing him her carry-on before, on light feet, jogging towards the hallway.

"Ms. Lane, please ... you can't ..."

Wells' voice faded off when Lois turned the corner to the hallway. Ryan had disappeared again, so she stopped, evaluating the situation. He must have gone in one of the doors lining the hallway. Obviously, he had a particular destination in mind — one that didn't appear to be commonly open to the public.

She began walking down the hall, quietly trying doors to see if any were open. The third one was. Taking a deep breath, she slowly pushed the door open just far enough to glance inside. It appeared to be some sort of work area. Luggage was being tossed on conveyer belts by men who didn't seem to understand the meaning of the word 'gently'. But there was no sign of Ryan.

She started to back out the door when something poking into her back and a cold voice in her ear brought her to a stop.

"So good of you to take the bait, Lois."

She knew that voice. "Ryan," she said.

"Step in," he growled, poking her in the back with what felt like a gun.

That made no sense. How had he managed to get on an airplane with a gun? Unless ... he had been in the military when he'd supposedly died. What if he still was? Maybe not the main line of the military but some black ops branch. And maybe this wasn't an American airport, but the American military did have pretty long arms when it came to convincing other governments to grant them access that others might well be denied.

"You are so predictable, Lane," Ryan said. "I knew all I had to do was to let you spot me and you'd follow."

He pushed her further into the room. She thought about calling for help from one of the workers, but quickly rejected that idea. With the gun digging into her back, one shot was all it would take for her to end up dead. Better to play for time. Wait for her moment. Besides, maybe that was the mistake she'd made the first time.

The mistake that had gotten her killed.

It made sense. Ryan had chosen this place for their confrontation so he obviously felt that the workers here would not intervene.

Damn. Wells had been right. "Why? Why would you want me to follow you?" she asked, hoping his need to brag about his brilliant plan would give her the time and opportunity she needed.

"Well, I hate to say this ... " He paused. "Actually, no I don't. I sort of enjoy saying this. My boss wants you dead."

"Why? What have I ever done to your boss ... whoever he might be?"

"You're trying to expose our business in the Congo. But then, poking your nose in where it doesn't belong is sort of a bad habit of yours, if I recall correctly. I tried to warn you about that back in college, but did you listen? No. It's too bad really. So now ... the boss wants you dead. And since I have no objections to that ..."

"Your boss? You're working for the scumbag who is selling

guns to rebels in the Congo?"

"Scumbag? I doubt Trevanian would appreciate being called a scumbag."

Trevanian. Where did she know that name? Wait a minute. "The assistant director of the NIA?" she asked. "You're working for the NIA?"

"Give the girl a medal," Ryan said.

"But why would the NIA be involved in gun running in the Congo?"

"I don't think I said the NIA was involved. Just Trevanian. Keep walking."

"Are you saying Trevanian is operating on his own?"

"Trevanian is a genius. He realizes that the government is paralyzed by politics. So he does what is necessary to ensure that bleeding-heart liberals like you don't jeopardize our freedom."

"And how does civil war in the Congo help with that?"

"Don't be an idiot. We don't give a damn about the Congo. But we do need a source of income for our various operations."

"The blood diamonds," Lois said as understanding began to sink in.

"Blood diamonds, as you so eloquently put it, can pay for a hell of a lot of secret ops."

"But why write that letter to Molly?"

"Payback. Partially. But I did have it in the back of my mind that it might give me an 'in' back into Molly's life if you ever got too close to one of our operations. Turns out, though, it wasn't necessary. Or won't be after today. On the other hand, now that you're going to be out of the picture, maybe I'll see if Molly wants to pick things up again. You know. Just for fun."

"Quit wasting time, Rye," a woman said. Lois glanced over as a woman appeared out of the shadows. "Kill her already. We've got work to do."

Great. Now there were two people with guns who seemed to want her dead.

"Keep your panties on, Sweet Tart," Ryan responded. "I was just getting to that."

"Well, you certainly seem to be taking your time."

This was it. Her last chance. Lois didn't even think — she just acted, swinging around and striking out at Ryan with her foot. Fortunately, her decision all those years ago to drop gymnastics in favor of kick-boxing had been a good one. Her foot struck the hand Ryan was using to hold the gun.

The gun fired. A cry directed Lois' eyes towards Ryan's coconspirator, who was holding onto her chest as a dark red stain began to form around her hands. A look of surprise appeared on the woman's face before she crumpled to the ground, dead. Lois spun back around, looking for the gun. She froze when she realized that Ryan had already beaten her to it. It seemed Ryan hadn't spared even a moment's thought for his partner — giving him the drop on Lois.

"Nice try, Lane," he said as he leveled the gun at her again. "Too bad it didn't work."

Lois froze, knowing that this was it. She'd gambled — and lost — on the most important decision of her life. Clark. Charlie. She sent out a silent apology to both of them.

It was then that she first spotted it. It appeared near Ryan. Just behind him actually, where he couldn't see it. Her eyebrows crinkled together for a moment in confusion. What the hell was ... Then it came back to her. She knew what she was seeing. A door ... like one she'd seen years ago. A door ... into the future!

"Any last words, Lane?" Ryan asked.

"Just one," Lois responded, as she saw Wells silently step up next to the door, and slightly behind Ryan, holding a piece of two by four, raised to strike.

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"Now!" Lois exclaimed. In the next second, two things happened at almost simultaneously. Wells swung, hitting Ryan in

the back as Lois dove for the door. Wells didn't stop to savor his victory. He was instantly diving after her. A bullet whizzed past just as the door closed, leaving her and Wells alone behind the Daily Planet.

June 1997

"Molly, if it hadn't been for Wells coming in when he did, Ryan would have killed me."

"You're mistaken," Molly said. "Ryan's not a murderer. He's changed. And he loves me. We can't be openly together right now because it would be too dangerous for me because of the work he's doing for the government. But ..."

"He's not working for the government. He's part of some illegal group of international thugs that Trevanian has put together."

"No, Lois. You have to be mistaken," Molly said, but the lack of color in her cheeks told another story. She believed every word Lois had said. She just so desperately didn't want to believe it.

Not that Lois blamed her. This was the second time Ryan had pulled the wool over her eyes, had played on her love for him.

The knock on the door was a relief to both women. Molly would need some time to digest this information and Lois didn't have the energy to argue her point any further.

"That's probably Clark," Lois said, walking over to the door and opening it.

"Ryan!" Lois exclaimed when she saw the man with a gun standing on the other side.

"I knew if I stayed close to the kid, you'd eventually reappear," Ryan said, pushing his way into the apartment. "Still, I couldn't believe it when I heard your voice coming over the bugs I planted in Molly's apartment. Talk about luck that I happened to turn on the transmitter tonight. Someone up there must really like me." He pointed to the heavens.

"Ryan, what are you doing?" Molly demanded.

"The way you just disappeared through that non-existent door was weird," Ryan said to Lois. "So I did a little digging. Even used that gaagle thing of yours, Mol ... " As he spoke, he corralled them back into the room by gesturing with the gun. "Found a picture of H.G. Wells. The man who'd been sitting beside you on the plane and, I suspect, the man who hit me with that two by four. Imagine how surprised I was to discover that he'd done more than just write a book about time travel. He actually invented a time machine."

"What do you want, Ryan?" Lois demanded.

"What do you think I want? Just think of the things Trevanian could do if we had a time machine."

"So that's why you came back into my life? To get the time machine?" Molly asked in disbelief.

"Don't look so upset, babe. It's not like it was a hardship for me. You're a great lay after all."

"No, Mol!" Lois exclaimed jumping out to grab her friend when an infuriated Molly dove at Ryan.

The gun sounded. Silence followed.

Clark was whistling off tune as he walked back to the apartment building, a small paper bag clutched in his hand. He stopped when he heard the echo of a gunshot. Looking over the top of his glasses, he scanned the area, looking for the sound's source. What he saw caused his heart to stop beating.

Without even bothering to change into the suit, he took off at full speed towards Molly's apartment. After throwing open the door and speeding inside, he suddenly stopped in confusion.

Crumpled on the floor next to the wall was Ryan, Lois kneeling beside him, her fingers searching for his pulse.

"Did I kill him, Mommy?" Charlie asked. "I didn't mean to push him so hard. But when I came out to get my juice and I saw him pointing that gun at you and Molly ... " His voice broke.

Clark saw Molly put her arm around his son.

"He's alive. He's just out cold," Lois said, looking up in relief. "Charlie, you did good. But we really should tie him up before calling Henders ... " Her voice trailed off when she saw Clark standing there, looking stunned. "Like father, like son, I guess," she said.

"What?" Molly asked, her arm still around Charlie but looking as if she was still not sure what had just happened here. "How was Charlie able to move so fast?"

"Wait a minute," Lois said, looking at Clark. "I thought you said everyone in your time knows that you are ... " She stopped speaking immediately. "Microphones," she suddenly mouthed, remembering what Ryan had said about having the place bugged.

Having been warned, Clark lowered his glasses and swept the room, locating and destroying all the bugs in a matter of seconds.

"I think I need to sit down," Molly suddenly said, plopping herself down on the couch without further ceremony.

"I take it you didn't know," Lois said, looking at her friend sympathetically.

"That Clark is ... That Clark is ... " Her eyes flicked over to Clark. Then, without saying the scary words, she simply shook her head. "Wait a minute!" Molly suddenly corrected herself. "I did know that. Lois, you told me about Clark being ... well, you know ... back in 1987. That must have been part of those memories Wells suppressed with that machine of his."

"Right!" Lois said. "Back when the future had everyone knowing. I take it that for some reason that's no longer the case."

"It's not, but ... " Clark began.

"My dad's Superman?" Charlie suddenly asked, directing everyone's attention to the wide-eyed boy who was staring at his father in disbelief.

"Yes, I am," Clark responded. "But ... first things first. I think we need to call Henderson. Right now our guest ... " He gestured his head towards Ryan. " ... appears to be out cold, but that's bound to change soon. But once that's taken care of ... " He looked at his son. " ... we'll have a long talk. Until then, you have to keep the fact that I'm Superman a secret."

Charlie, though still looking stunned, nodded soberly.

Henderson arrived with reinforcements in tow. When Clark had called, giving a short explanation, Henderson informed him that this was sort of outside his jurisdiction, but he knew someone who was currently looking into corruption in the NIA he could call. When Clark had inquired as to whether this man could be trusted, he'd received an unequivocal yes.

Still, how could one take a man seriously who showed up to work in a bright red shirt with a loud Hawaiian print on it?

"Agent Scardino," the man said, holding out his hand to Clark. "But please call me Daniel."

Clark shook it, noting that, in spite of the man's outrageous taste in clothing, he had a strong grip and clear eyes.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Henderson gasped when he looked past Scardino and Clark and even the man tied up on the floor to see Lois sitting on the couch, her arm around Charlie.

"Hi, Henderson," Lois said with a smile. "Seems rumors of my death were greatly exaggerated."

"So I see," Henderson said, his face splitting into the first smile Clark thought he'd ever seen grace Henderson's face. "And I want to hear all about it," he added. "But let's deal with this other matter first."

With that, Lois filled Henderson and Scardino in, being sure to stick with a sanitized version of Charlie's roll in events and making no mention of time travel — instead, talking about how Ryan had tried to kill her in 1993 to keep her from looking into Travonian's involvement in gun running to the Congo. When she managed to escape, he'd reconnected with Molly, knowing that

sooner or later she'd return here — which she had done as soon as she was able. When she finally finished, Scardino turned towards their now-conscious captive.

"Well, well, well. Ryan Wiley. Trevanian's hit man," Scardino said, walking over to the man trussed up on the floor. "I knew you were involved in this mess up to your slimy neck, Wiley. But being caught like this by American civilians? A child, no less. Sloppy. Sloppy. And trust me when I say I'm going to enjoy hearing you spill your guts about Trevanian."

"I know my rights, Scardino. You'll learn nothing from me," Ryan said.

"What rights?" Scardino said with a smirk that left Clark feeling a little uncomfortable.

Still, given what this man had tried to do, he couldn't say he cared enough to want to probe the matter further.

"Last I heard," Scardino continued, "dead men don't have rights. And even if you weren't really dead before, treason is still a capital offence. I'm guessing you'll tell us everything we want to know about Trevanian in exchange for saving that worthless carcass of yours."

Scardino glanced around the room. "I can't thank you enough for calling. We've been looking for this one for years. Problem is that being dead makes a great cover. I guess that means I'm going to win the office pool because I was betting that you were still alive."

"Suck my ... " Ryan growled.

"I don't think so, Wiley," Scardino interrupted. "I wouldn't want to pick up anything nasty."

Two other men arrived and the next few minutes were occupied getting Ryan into a black van with government plates, followed by Scardino getting everyone's statements.

"Well, I guess that's everything," Scardino finally said. "We'll call if we need anything else." His gaze stopped on Molly. "Are you all right, Miss Flynn?"

Clark's eyebrows rose and he glanced at Lois who returned his baffled stare.

"Just a little shaky," Molly said, giving Scardino a wobbly smile.

"That's understandable, given the circumstances." Scardino pulled a card out of his pocket and scribbled something on it. "My cell phone number's on the back. You'll probably find that it hits you hardest in a few hours. Give me a call if you need to talk. Or ... for anything else."

"Thanks," Molly said, looking carefully at the card even as a slight blush rose in her cheeks. Clark could even tell that her body temperature had gone up a notch or two. Sort of the way Lois' body temperature always rose with him.

Clark had to hide a smile. It seemed Scardino had found something other than Ryan of interest here tonight. And by Molly's reaction, she was feeling it too.

"Hey, Lane," Henderson said as he and Scardino prepared to leave the apartment.

"Yes, Inspector?" Lois asked.

"Good to have you back."

"Good to be back," she responded.

"And I expect to see you down at the precinct to fill me in on the whole story soon."

"Count on it, Inspector. After all, I'm going to want an update on Ryan for the Daily Planet," Lois responded with a grin.

Henderson laughed. "God help me. Something tells me it's going to be just like old times."

"Only better," Lois added, slipping her hand into Clark's while they watched Henderson and Scardino leave.

Clark took a deep breath as they waited. Molly might have known he was Superman — or at least had when her memory of 1987 came back — but Charlie hadn't.

]From Charlie's display of strength tonight, although that was

undoubtedly assisted by a shot of adrenaline, and his use of his superhearing earlier, Charlie was going to need some special instruction on how to use and control his powers. Clark could hardly believe how much he was looking forward to sharing his unique abilities with his son.

"It's been a long night," Lois said. "I know we all need to talk. But might I suggest we wait until morning?"

When everyone agreed, Lois led Charlie into his room, tucking the exhausted child into bed while Molly and Clark straightened up the living room.

When Lois returned a few minutes later, Clark spotted her, caught suddenly in the heat of her gaze.

"Get out of here, you two," Molly said, obviously picking up on the electricity that was suddenly charging the atmosphere.

Clark needed no further encouragement. Grabbing Lois' hand, he led her quickly to the door. While waiting for the elevator, it suddenly occurred to him that he had dropped a particular paper bag on his way into the building.

"I'll be right back," Clark said, leaving Lois staring after him as he disappeared out the front door and giggling when he returned a few seconds later, carrying his paper bag. "I didn't think I could father children with an Earth woman," he said, staring straight ahead as they entered the elevator. "I've just recently learned that I can."

Lois giggled.

EPILOGUE

'Happily Ever After'

(aka 'Weekly Trips to the Fudge Castle')

July 1997

Clark ran his fingers through his newly grown beard — and just in time, too. The charity event ended next week. It had been a month since Lois had joined him in 1997, a month since he'd realized that Charlie was his son, a month where he'd been falling ever more in love with his wife and a month during which he'd been happier than he'd ever been in his life.

For the first couple of weeks, he'd had no choice but to avoid appearing as Superman. He simply hadn't been able to risk it, given the danger it would present to Lois and Charlie and even Molly if anyone made the connection between Clark and Superman. But as soon as the beard had grown in again, Superman had returned to the skies.

Before he'd gone into the past, his Superman duties had been completely overwhelming him. Now ... Having Lois to come home to after a hard rescue ... Her pride in him, her support and even her knocking some sense into him when he'd begin to obsess made all the difference. And when that didn't work ... Well, it seemed she had other ways to get his mind off a bad rescue. A smile made its way onto his face as one memory in particular suddenly distracted him.

After a moment, he turned his mind to other matters, knowing if he didn't, he was unlikely to get anything else done today.

He was glad that they had decided to stay in Molly's apartment building for the foreseeable future. They would probably move into a bigger apartment when one became available, but for now Molly was thrilled to have Charlie continue to live with her. And since Lois hadn't had more than a number of boxes of clothing and other nicknacks, having her move into Clark's apartment hadn't been a problem. Given that they were only one flight of stairs away, it was almost like living in one big house together.

Agent Scardino, Mr-Please-Call-Me-Daniel as Clark had taken to calling him when he wasn't around, seemed to have become a regular feature at the apartment building lately, too. Clark still didn't see the attraction, but Lois approved of the newly budding romance, so he was more than prepared to accept

Scardino as part of their little family. Besides, even he could see that Scardino made Molly happy.

Lois' parents were thrilled she was alive and Lois had been stunned when her mother, in tears, had actually thanked her for not listening to them when they had demanded she have an abortion all those years ago. It would still take some time, but all three parties were working hard to restore their relationship.

Still, her parents had both seemed slightly hurt by the announcement that she and Clark had gotten married. Not that they didn't like Clark. Or at least, he didn't think that was it. And since they'd been able to tell them that Clark was the man who had been visiting friends at NTU when Lois had gotten pregnant, they hadn't objected to the marriage on the grounds that she hadn't known Clark all that long.

Clark got the impression that their hurt stemmed from the fact that they hadn't been invited to the wedding. After all, Lois and Clark didn't feel comfortable telling them that they'd actually gotten married back in 1987 — not without telling them about time travel. After all, how else could they ever explain getting married and Clark then simply disappearing? But it had been wonderful being able to tell people that he was Charlie's father.

He briefly wondered what Lana would think should she ever hear of it. But he hadn't seen or heard from Lana for years so it was unlikely she'd ever know.

Perry was thrilled to have Lois back. And even more thrilled when they'd told him they were married. He'd had her back on the Daily Planet payroll so fast it almost made Clark's head spin.

Cat had almost been beside herself when Lois had walked through the doors to the Daily Planet, asking questions so fast that Lois hardly had time to answer through her laughter.

Cat was the only person besides Perry who they'd told about time travel. That had been unavoidable because, in a leap that was impressive, the first time she'd seem him and Lois together Cat had finally figured out why Clark had always looked so familiar to her. When they had tried to claim that, while it was true that Clark was Charlie's father, it was when he had visited Metropolis once while he was in college, she simply hadn't bought the story. She'd known that it wasn't a twenty-one year old version of Clark who she remembered but one who was more like thirty. And she'd refused to believe that Clark wouldn't have figured out fairly quickly that Charlie was his son if he had slept with Lois in college.

Clark had to wonder if the only reason Lois' parents had bought the story was that they didn't dare challenge it — due to their determination to reestablish their relationship with their daughter.

The story they were telling everyone, other than those on the inside, about Lois' disappearance had actually been provided thanks to the other Lois who had shown up over a year ago. Since that Lois had found out about Charlie quickly, she had taken great care only to be seen by himself, Perry and Jimmy Olsen. So they'd been able to use the excuse she had provided. That she'd been hurt ... in a coma, in fact ... and convalescing at a mission in the Congo, unable to get as much as a message back that she was alive.

Not that everything had gone smoothly. Driver's license, bank accounts, credit cards and even means of transportation had all been a problem. But they were sorting them out one at a time. At least seven years hadn't passed and she hadn't been officially declared dead. Otherwise, there would have been added problems like life insurance payouts since she'd had a couple policies to take care of Charlie.

In addition to the other changes in his life, Clark had started taking Charlie out to the country to explore the extent of his developing powers. Clark smiled as he thought about Lois' reaction the first time he'd suggested the idea.

"A little father/son bonding time is always a good thing,"

she'd said as casually as if he'd suggested taking Charlie to a football game. Although, given her aversion to football, maybe her reaction was even better than if he had suggested the game. But after Lana, Lois' easy acceptance of his powers was refreshing.

Yes. Life was good. Still, there was one detail that Clark had yet to take care of.

"Hey, kiddo," Clark said from the doorway to Charlie's room.

Charlie looked up from where he was concentrating on putting together a model airplane. The principles of flight had recently become his new passion.

"I could use some help. Wanna go out and help your old man?"

"Sure," Charlie said, springing to his feet with all the energy of an eight year old boy who loved spending time with his father. "Where are we going?"

"We need to do some shopping."

Charlie's smile faded. "Shopping?"

Clark nodded. "Trust me. It's a matter of life or death and I can't do it without you."

Still not sure it wasn't some kind of trick, Charlie accompanied Clark to the door to the apartment where he slipped on his shoes.

Lois pulled Molly's car up in front of 344 Clinton and turned off the ignition. Molly had sold Lois' Jeep when she hadn't returned from the Congo and put the money in a trust account for Charlie's education — which was great, but left Lois without a car now that she'd returned. Just one more thing she was going to have to take care of in the very near future.

She sighed. It had been a long day — so much longer than the days when she was working with Clark. In fact, working with Clark was just as great as she had imagined it would be all those years ago. But he'd had the day off, so she'd had to hold down the fort. They had decided to do a little bit of juggling with their schedules so that they could each spend some alone time with Charlie during his summer vacation. It was working well — except that she so desperately missed Clark on the days he wasn't at work with her.

"You've got it bad, girl," she said to herself for what felt like the millionth time.

She was just getting out of the car when, in the corner of her eye, she saw the door to the apartment building open briefly and a little head poke out before quickly disappearing back inside. Gathering up her briefcase, she locked the car. The head poked out briefly again.

She smiled. What was going on?

As she walked up the steps, the door opened a third time and Charlie was there.

"Hey, what are you ... " she began when she realized that Charlie was wearing a tux.

"You have to come with me," Charlie interrupted, grabbing her arm as he began pulling her towards Molly's apartment.

Lois allowed her son to take her into the apartment where she saw Molly sitting on the couch, reading a book. Lois shot a questioning look her way.

"I know nothing," Molly said, but the tone of her voice told Lois a different story.

"Sure, pull a Schultz on me now," Lois grumbled playfully as she was pulled through the apartment to Charlie's bedroom.

"Put those on," Charlie said, pushing her into the bedroom and closing the door behind her.

"What?" Lois said, even as she stepped over to the bed to see a dress laid out on top.

She picked the dress up by the hanger. It was a classy, but simple, long, flowing red dress. Beside it were a package of pantihose and an elegant pair of pumps. The only thing she

recognized was the shoes. It seemed that whoever had purchased the dress wasn't so sure he could manage shoes that would fit. Well, okay, let's see how he or she did with dress size and style.

"You look beautiful," Molly said when Lois emerged from the bedroom.

Lois smiled. "Thanks. I have to admit, I love the dress. I just wish I could do something with my hair."

Molly rose to her feet. "Well, let's see if we can do something about that," she said, gesturing Lois into the kitchen where Molly began tossing Lois' hair into something a bit more dressy.

"Oh, I forgot," Charlie said, reaching into his pocket and taking out a small white box. "This is for you. Dad said this dress needed something else." He shrugged, as if he didn't exactly understand that.

Intrigued, she opened the box to see a heart shaped gold pendant with three different colored stones in it.

"See ..." said Charlie, pointing at it. "Those are birthstones for you and me and Dad."

"I love it," she said, fingering the delicate piece of jewelry affectionately even as she realized that there was space to add more stones — if necessary. She wasn't quite sure how she felt about that. Still, for now she pushed the thought aside. There would be plenty of time to think about that in the years to come. "Thank you very much." She pulled her son closer to kiss his cheek, chuckling when he wiped it off. Removing the pendant from the box, she undid the latch before handing it to Molly who helped her put it on.

"We gotta go," Charlie insisted, pulling on his mother's hand the moment the necklace was in place.

"Oh, are you my escort for the evening?" Lois asked, rising to her feet. "Isn't he so cute in his tux?" Lois asked Molly.

"Mom," Charlie groaned in embarrassment.

"Yummy enough to eat," Lois continued.

"Mom," Charlie groaned again, even as Molly laughed at the interaction.

"I'm so hungry that maybe I'll do just that," Lois said, grabbing her son and planting kisses on his face.

"Mom!" Charlie said, pushing her away. "I'm almost nine!"

"Oh, right," Lois said, grabbing a tissue to wipe the lipstick off his face. "I forgot. Okay, so if you're my escort for the evening, where are we going?"

Charlie quickly recovered, offering her his arm. Her eyebrows rose. She suspected he'd been coached by someone. She took the offered arm, enjoying herself immensely, as he led her down the hall to the elevator.

"Have fun," she heard Molly call after her.

Lois wasn't surprised when they arrived outside the door to her and Clark's apartment. Still, when Clark answered his door, looking handsome in his tux, she still felt her breath catch in her throat.

"You look beautiful," Clark said immediately, stepping forward to give her a kiss.

Lois' hand on his chest stopped him. "I don't kiss one guy when I'm on a date with another," she said. "Unless, of course, my date gives me his permission."

"Mom!" Charlie complained.

"How about it, pal?" Clark said, looking at Charlie. "Is it okay if I give your date a kiss?"

"I guess," Charlie said, his crinkled nose telling both his parents what he thought of the whole kissing thing.

Lois laughed as she grabbed the lapels of Clark's jacket to pull him in for a slow and sultry kiss.

"Wow!" Clark said when she finally released him. He looked over at his son. "Trust me — your mother sure knows how to kiss."

"Come on," Charlie said, grabbing his mother's hand again to pull her into the room, trying to ignore all that gross kissing stuff in his excitement to show Lois what the apartment looked like.

And Lois had to admit, the apartment was impressive. The room was lit only by candlelight. Clark must have bought out an entire candle store.]From the ceiling hung streamers and attached at various places around the room were balloons — obviously Charlie's contributions to the decorations. Soft, romantic jazz filled the air. The wonderful aroma of something incredible cooking made Lois' stomach grumble and directed her eyes towards the kitchen where a romantic table for three was set up.

She smiled. It seemed she was about to be romanced by her two favorite guys.

"Why don't you escort your mother to the table ..." Clark suggested. "... while I open the wine?"

Charlie immediately held his arm out for his mother, widening the smile on Lois' face.

Lois relaxed back on the sofa sipping her wine while her guys finished cleaning up in the kitchen. Dinner had been wonderful. And that dessert ... Obviously it had come directly from The Fudge Castle. But Lois had to admit, she was slightly confused. It wasn't her birthday. It wasn't a special occasion. So what was going on here?

Glancing over at the kitchen, she saw Charlie and Clark with their heads together, obviously plotting something.

She was surprised when they came into the living room and Clark picked up the coffee table, moving it to the side. She was even more surprised when he got down on one knee in front of her.

"Back in 1987 when we got married," Clark began, "something was missing. You told me that when you got to the future, I better have it waiting for you. So today, Charlie and I went out and made a couple of purchases." He pulled a velvet box out of his pocket, opening it to reveal a beautiful diamond ring.

She glanced at the ring before looking back in his eyes.

"It's not a blood diamond, I promise," Clark began, causing Lois to giggle. "I made sure to get a Canadian diamond." Then Clark turned more serious.

"Lois, since I've met you, you've given me so many gifts. You've given me your trust, your acceptance, your heart and your love. You've also given me something that I wasn't sure I could even have. A son. And you took on the responsibility of raising him by yourself.

"I fell in love with you back in 1987 and I love you even more today. More than I ever thought it possible to love." He paused briefly. "I want you to accept this gift as a symbol of how much I love you." He reached into the box and withdrew the ring.

"Yes," Lois said immediately. As he slipped the ring onto her finger, tears began congregating in her eyes and then they were kissing.

"I thought this was supposed to make you happy," Charlie said when he saw the tears now slipping down her cheeks.

Lois laughed as she broke the kiss so that she could reach out and pull Charlie into their family circle. "I am happy. But ... shouldn't there be another ring?"

Clark gave Charlie a nod and he nodded back before pulling a second velvet box out of his pocket.

"Charlie and I also picked up two more rings. But I asked him to hang onto them for now." To Lois' questioning look, Clark continued. "I'd like for us to renew our vows in front of family and friends. I want the world to know how much I love you. So ... what do you say? Will you marry me ... again?"

"I will marry you, Clark Kent, as many times as you want," she said, throwing herself back into his arms and kissing him with renewed passion.

"Do you guys have to keep doing that?" Charlie asked.

Lois and Clark laughed.

"Someday you'll actually understand this," Clark said.

"I hope not," Charlie said. "You guys are gross."

"Why don't you go down and see what Molly's doing?"

Clark suggested as Lois began planting kisses on his neck.

"Thanks for all your help today, but I think I can handle it from here."

Charlie was out of the apartment almost immediately, closing the door, leaving both Lois and Clark chuckling behind him.

"Are you sure Molly's home?" Lois asked. "That she didn't have a date with Dan tonight?"

"Molly told me that she and Scardino would stay in tonight so that they could keep an eye on him if we needed them to," Clark said, sweeping Lois up in his arms and slowly walking towards the bedroom. "She seemed to anticipate we might ... need some privacy. So ... what's your position on premarital sex? I mean, I guess we could wait until we've exchanged our vows again before ..."

Lois pulled him in for a kiss, which caused his feet to drift off the floor.

"What were you saying?" she asked, pulling his bow tie apart as the kiss broke.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Good," she said as she began undoing the buttons on his shirt. "Then how fast do you think you can get us into the bedroom?"

Clark didn't need a more explicit hint. In less than a second, a gust of wind blew out all the candles and left the now-abandoned living room in darkness. A very feminine giggle echoed through the apartment.

Across the street from 344 Clinton Avenue, a man in an old fashioned suit and bowler hat watched the lights go out in the second floor apartment. It had been quite an adventure. But then, every adventure with Lois Lane and Clark Kent was quite an adventure.

All was now right with the universe. He was confident Lois and Clark could take it from here. The future would be whatever they decided to make it. Knowing Lois and Clark, it was bound to be full of love and excitement. Still, all was now in their hands — which was where it should be.

He checked his pocket watch one final time before pushing a button on the small black box in his hand. A moment later, he was gone, leaving behind him ... the future.

THE END

Author's Notes and Credits:

I used the crime statistics in 1990 New York City for 1987 Metropolis in my story. But I would note that the city has managed to cut its crime rate significantly since then (way to go, New York City):
http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/downloads/pdf/crime_statistics/crime_statistics.pdf

If you want to hear George Michael's 'Faith' you can do so here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPUNsN-0Lz4&NR=1>

My submarine references came from watching too many WWII movies, in particular War and Remembrance and U-571.

Dr. Emmett Brown is not my creation. He is the scientist who invented the time machine in Back To The Future — which you Back To The Future fans may have already figured out from my description. In the spirit of the show, I also used names for some of my other characters that were take offs on names of real people. Did you figure out who?

My information about GHB and other date rape drugs came from many different websites. If you want more information on

date rape drugs and how to protect yourself, I would suggest you begin your research with this website:

<http://www.womenshealth.gov/faq/date-rape-drugs.cfm#b>

Upon doing a worldwide search of caselaw, the first reference I saw to the phrase 'date rape drugs' was in 1999. However, it does take some time after something is introduced to make it into the cases that are published. So although I do not remember the year I first heard the term, I'm going to guess it was the mid-1990s, making Clark aware of this crime while Lois is not. However, if I am wrong ... Well, this is an alternate universe [g]. (And thanks to Ann (TOC) for giving me the idea to search the caselaw.)

The comment made by Katie Carrick when she becomes editor of the Ink and Quill ("Competition is one aspect of the job, but if you're too busy worrying about the competition, you don't focus enough on what you're doing.") is a direct quote from Katie Couric (clever, ain't I [g]).

The Italian in this story was provided courtesy of Sara "Lieta."

As for the plug for Canadian diamonds ... Hey, I'm a Canadian. What can I say? If you're interested in information on conflict or blood diamonds and want to know how to avoid them, check out this website:

<http://jewelry.about.com/cs/diamondmining/a/diamonds.htm> and then click on the list of signatories for those retailers who are committed to selling conflict free diamonds to find out where you can purchase them.

So, folks, that's it; that's all. Hope you enjoyed the ride.