

Play Some Mountain Music

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Rated: PG-13 (for violence)

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Summary: When Clark goes undercover at the Metro Club, he meets a beautiful brunette musician who intrigues him beyond the parameters of his investigation. But when he finds out that she's not quite who she claims to be, he decides to investigate Lois Lane in greater depth. An alternate beginning to the greatest love story in fiction.

This story is an alternate beginning for Lois and Clark and draws on Lois' musical talents as displayed in the first season's "I've Got A Crush On You" and the third season's "Seconds" (from the much-beloved "clone Lois" arc). There is character death in this story, but the major characters survive, and the toys go back into the toy box intact, albeit a little bent.

In no particular order, let me salute Elisabeth, DSDragon, CarolM, and IolantheAlias. All four of these hard-working and determined betas went the extra kilometer (or mile, depending on where they might live) and helped make this story as much fun as it is. If you like a specific part, it's a good bet that at least one of them contributed materially to that scene, and often all four of them did. And they all helped me replace the original title (which worked for the original outline but not for the tale which demanded to be told). Great job, y'all!

One note: the chapter titles are all existing song titles and no copyright infringement is implied or intended. The recognizable characters in this story belong not to me but to their respective legal entities. This story is intended as homage to those characters and not an infringement of copyright.

Lyrics to "Fever" © EMI Music Publishing, Warner/Chappell Inc.; written by Karl Hyde, Rick Smith, Alfie Thomas. If you're not familiar with the song "Fever," follow this link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wX2LCl8G_U&feature=related for a look at Deep Space Nine's version of it. Very interesting.

Lyrics to "Tall Dark Handsome Stranger" © 1990 Albert Hammond Music; written by Albert Hammond and Holly Knight. Performed by Heart on the albums "Brigade" and "Greatest Hits: 1985-1995" Hear this song on YouTube by Heart: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QoiNjhC6stY>

>>>> Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue
January 1992

The four women entering the Western-themed club in Denver that evening might have appeared mismatched to the casual observer. The waitress who seated them surely didn't give them any thought beyond hope for a good tip.

That casual observer would probably first notice the diminutive redhead with the stunning figure who captivated observers despite her short stature. Then the unnamed observer might be startled by the tall and muscular African-American woman who moved with the strength and ease of a panther. Next, the observer might note the gorgeous blond of medium height with a pageant-winning smile. Last but not least, the observer's eyes might take in the calm assurance and guarded features of the attractive woman with wavy brown shoulder-length hair. Of the

four, the tall African-American woman might be judged to be the least attractive of the four, but only by comparison with her companions. They were each of them more than merely pleasant to look at.

Any single one of them would call attention to herself simply by entering a room. Together, they created a mild stir in the dining room as they sat down and ordered non-alcoholic drinks and a single appetizer, a plate of mild buffalo wings. That casual observer might then turn back to his or her meal and dinner conversation, never realizing that he or she had been looking at the Mountaintops, an up-and-coming rock quartet from the West Coast, a group who was hoping to sign a recording contract with a hungry record distributor that very evening.

The man whom the four women had come to meet walked into the dining room less than five minutes after the band members had been seated, before they had eaten all of the wings. Ramona Wilcox, the group's keyboardist and business manager, stood and held out a chair for the short chubby man. "Thanks for meeting with us after business hours, Mr. Townsend. We know how busy you are."

"No problem. You ladies are even more attractive in person than in your group picture." He helped Ramona back to her chair before seating himself, earning a few courtesy points from the women at the table.

"We still appreciate the effort you're putting forth."

"Hey, if I want to build up my record label, I have to hustle for artists just like the artists have to hustle for gigs."

All four of the young women around the table smiled and nodded. "Ain't that the truth," answered the tall black drummer. "And all that hustlin' gettin' old. Havin' a real label supportin' us gonna help a whole lot."

The blond guitarist waved for the waitress before turning to face the man. "Shamika's right, Mr. Townsend. The Mountaintops have always worked steadily and we've always made enough money to live on without starving, but it would be nice to have a professionally recorded disc or three to sell at our shows. It would be nice to get some national exposure, too."

"That's what I'm here for, Connie." Townsend smiled and revealed his perfectly capped teeth. "I understand that you ladies have a booking starting on Friday."

"That's right," answered Ramona. "Two weeks in Denver's finest dance club. It's unusual for us to have two days off before a gig, but we can use the down time for rest and equipment maintenance."

"Good for you. Listen, before we get down to dollars and cents, I'd like to talk to you about some suggestions I have for the group."

Ramona, Connie, and Shamika all frowned in surprise, but Jennifer Bates, the band's red-headed bass player, opened her eyes even wider. "Ooh, Mr. Townsend, we'd love to hear your suggestions! We wanna be as successful as we can be."

Townsend clapped his palms together once and rubbed them as if warming them up. "Excellent!" The waitress arrived and he turned to order a drink.

Connie Vandross, the group's lead guitarist, leaned towards Ramona and muttered, "I don't like this talk of suggestions. It makes me nervous."

Ramona didn't look at her as she lifted her glass of tea to hide her mouth. "We'll listen, Connie, but if we don't like his ideas, we won't use them."

Just then the lights over the tables dimmed and the club's MC took the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a treat for you tonight! Direct from Metropolis by way of Nashville and Muscle Shoals, may I introduce to you: The Fast Lanes!"

Scattered applause bounced around the room as Ramona appraised the trio approaching the microphones with a practiced eye. Standing in the middle with an acoustic guitar slung over his

shoulder, a very young man began strumming a ‘C’ chord in a straight four-beats-to-the-bar rhythm. The two women flanking the man tapped their feet in time and smiled. The darker-haired one thumped lightly on muted bass strings with her thumb, and the other woman skillfully plucked out a nimble intro to Hank Williams’ “Jambalaya” on her acoustic guitar. The young man — more a boy, really — began singing the first verse, but he was obviously nervous. He looked like he’d almost rather be anywhere else but where he was.

Townsend followed Ramona’s line of sight and shook his head. “They won’t make it unless they get rid of that boy. Those two gals are pretty good, and they look good on stage, but that kid is holding them back.” The waitress arrived with his drink and he took a sip. “Ahh! That’s a good martini.”

Ramona listened to the guitar player on the stage and decided she knew what she was doing. Jennifer distracted her when she leaned over and put her hand on Townsend’s arm. “Mr. Townsend, you mentioned something about some changes? What were they?”

“Right. Well, the way I see it is like this. The music business today is built around individuals, not bands, and the people who get airplay for their videos and their singles are the ones who are individual artists. Michael Jackson and Janet Jackson, not the Jacksons or the Jackson Five. Bruce Springsteen, not just the E Street Band. Gladys Knight and the Pips. Diana Ross and the Supremes, even though they’re not together any more. Acts like that.”

Connie crossed her arms and leaned back. “So what’s your suggestion?”

“Glad you asked. Look, all four of you ladies are attractive as individuals, and any of you could front a group with your looks, not to mention your talents. So my suggestion is to move one of the four of you up front and rename the group to, say, Connie Vandross and the Mountaintops. Not only would you score some automatic name recognition, putting Connie out front would make your first videos more popular. And the more you pop up on video rotation, the more albums you sell and the more gigs you get. Better ones, too, and they’ll pay you more money, give you more perks.”

Ramona shook her head. “Mr. Townsend, I don’t think you understand what we’re all about. We’re pretty much like four Musketeers, all for one and one for all. We want to succeed, but we want to do it together. And we want to do it on an equal basis.”

“Having one of you out front doesn’t mean you won’t succeed together. It’s an image thing more than it is a change in the group.”

“Putting any one of us out front and putting her name first makes the rest of us a backup band. We’re not a backup band, Mr. Townsend, we’re a quartet. Ideally, we’d like to be almost as successful as the Beatles and we —”

“Almost as successful?”

Ramona’s eyebrow twitched in momentary amusement. “Those guys had no privacy at all. Everybody knew John, Paul, George, and Ringo as individuals, but they also identified them as the Beatles. We want people to know Ramona, Jennifer, Connie, and Shamika as the Mountaintops, not as individuals. Besides, as equals we can support each other better, and our identity won’t be tied to just one face.”

Townsend nodded and played with his glass. “Your loyalty to the group concept does you credit, Ramona, but you’re not facing the hard realities of today’s market. It takes more than talent and determination. It takes the right marketing.”

“We’re not a product, we’re a band. We make music. We don’t wash dishes or sell cars. What you’re proposing isn’t —”

“No!” Jennifer burst out. “Ramona, it’s a great idea! Just because one of us would be out front most of the time doesn’t

mean we change the way the money is split up. And it doesn’t mean that the rest of us wouldn’t get to sing as much. He’s not talking about changing the band as much as he’s talking about packaging and presenting us to sell albums and generate bookings! And isn’t that why we’re all together?”

Connie fixed Jennifer with a fierce glare. “That sounds just fine, Jen, but I’m still not going to do it.”

“For heaven’s sake, why not?”

“Because the other two bands I’ve been in that had a shot at something significant fell apart because somebody got too self-important, and it was always the one whose name was listed ahead of the rest of the group. I refuse to be responsible for damaging the terrific vibe we’ve got going here.”

“All right,” Townsend said soothingly. “We can put someone else out front. What about Jennifer? I think ‘Jennifer Bates and the Mountaintops’ has a very nice ring to it.”

Connie leaned forward with purpose. “The answer’s still no. If we put her out front and build some recognition using her name, none of the rest of us can front the band in a video or an album cover. Nobody would buy Ramona singing lead for Jennifer and the Mountaintops because she wouldn’t be Jennifer. We wouldn’t be able to put Shamika in front on an album cover, either, for the same reason. And I’m not willing to wreck this band for anyone’s ego.”

Ramona leaned back in her chair. This discussion wasn’t going the way she’d thought it would. It was getting too emotional and too personal. She lifted one finger to get everyone to pause, then looked up at the stage again. “Let’s take a minute to listen to the competition, ladies.”

The trio had finished their first tune and the shorter guitarist had put down her instrument and sat down at the piano. Ramona recognized at once that the young woman on the stage was not only a good guitarist and good backup singer, she was a whiz on the keyboard, too. Ramona had to remind herself not to be jealous of the younger woman’s age or her obvious skills.

The group slipped smoothly into the B. J. Thomas hit “Another Somebody Done Somebody Wrong Song,” and the young man seemed to be settling down. His strumming was smoother and his voice was stronger. The taller woman singing harmony had a good voice and a sure but gentle touch on the bass. But the young man didn’t seem to fit with the others. They seemed to be carrying him, despite his being the lead vocalist and apparent front person.

Ramona decided that Townsend knew something about the business and seemed to be a good judge of talent. Maybe the man had a point, both about the group on stage and about the Mountaintops, but she wasn’t ready to make such a drastic change in the way they’d been playing for the last three years.

Ramona felt a tap on her elbow. “Mona, we need to talk about this,” growled Shamika. “I don’t wanna front the band and I don’t wanna get pushed into the background. I just wanna play drums and sing backup.”

“I know, Sham. Look, Mr. Townsend, we’re glad you’re taking an interest in our presentation, but we’re a group, not a quartet of soloists. We’re not going to change what’s been working for us.”

Townsend frowned for the first time. “You have to work within the limits of the business, ladies. The Bangles were known only fairly well until that ‘Walk Like An Egyptian’ video made them hot properties. After that, they were stars.”

“Yeah,” said Connie, “and then they imploded. Jealousy and a manager who was working for the money and determined to make Susannah Hoff a huge star ripped them apart and destroyed a really good band.”

“But we won’t let that happen to us!” cried Jennifer. “Come on, girls! We have a shot at some real money here, some real recognition! We can make it to the big time!” She turned to

Shamika. “Come on, Sham! You can buy Mrs. Jones a new car! Or even a house!”

Shamika’s response was quiet but edged with resentment. “My momma don’t need me to buy her nothin’. She like her house just fine and she ain’t starvin’.”

The other people at the table, including Townsend, sensed Shamika’s anger and sat silently. Ramona gently touched Shamika on the forearm. She knew that the other woman was beginning to lose track of her temper when she lapsed deeper into Southern-speak. Shamika was difficult to rile, but if she ever did lose control, it would take a concerted effort for her to regain it. She was big enough and strong enough to do some real damage before she did, and that wouldn’t do her or the band any good at all, so Ramona pressed on Shamika’s arm until the bigger woman relaxed and sat back in her chair.

The band on the stage shifted songs again, and this time the bass player took the lead vocal on Patsy Cline’s “Crazy.” Her voice was more suited to jazz or rock than old-time country, thought Ramona, but she did a serviceable job on the song and captured the feeling if not the sound of the original. Ramona looked around the club and nodded at the Western motif on the walls. The song not only fit the club, but the audience seemed to be enjoying it.

Townsend sighed loudly. “Look here, ladies, I want to work with the four of you, but you need to work with me too. I have quite a bit of experience in booking acts in dozens of clubs between the Rockies and the Mississippi River, and I’m telling you that you need to have a single face for people to focus on. I know what I’m talking about.” He turned to his only ally. “If you were to put Jennifer out front, it might be the best compromise. After all, Cream’s front man was Jack Bruce, their bassist.”

Connie and Ramona both shook their heads. “Jennifer has the looks,” Connie said, “and she has the vocal chops to front a band. No question that she could do the job, and if we were putting a group together around her it could work very well. But that’s not the point. Like Ramona said, we are a band, not a collection of soloists. And as long as you’re talking about individuals being or not being the face of a band, remember Credence Clearwater Revival? The casual fan with three or four CCR albums couldn’t tell Stu Cook or Doug Clifford from either of the Fogarty brothers. And I bet you can’t name the three singers in Three Dog Night, or tell me where the band’s name came from. Those guys practically owned the top forty for years.”

Townsend waved his hand as if batting her words away. “Different era, different audience. People want visual stimulation now, not just great sound. If they didn’t, Thomas Dolby would never have been on the charts at all.” He smiled again, this time with more of a bite. “Danny Hutton, Cory Wells, and Chuck Negron were the singers in Three Dog Night. The band name comes from an Australian slang term for a very cold night on the Outback, so cold you’d need three dogs around you to keep you from freezing to death.”

Ramona nodded. “You know your music history, I’ll give you that. But the answer is the same. We’re a group. Sign us as a group.”

Townsend sighed again as the Fast Lanes shifted into “Leavin’ On A Jet Plane,” which Ramona thought was a bit incongruous for the venue. “Ladies, I can’t force you to do anything you don’t want to do. And I’m sorry that you won’t take my advice on this matter. I really believe that it would be the most profitable course of action for you.”

He made as if to stand, but Jennifer grabbed his arm and pulled him back down. “No! Please don’t leave! Tell them! Tell them what you told me!”

Three sets of eyebrows rose in unison. Shamika slapped the table and glowered at the band’s bassist. “Why was you talking to Townsend without us?”

Townsend lifted his hands. “Ladies, please! Jennifer anticipated your objections and called me two days ago to discuss this very issue. I will tell you what I told her. I’m ready to sign the band to a deal on the condition that I take over management of the group. If that’s not an option, then perhaps we —”

A crash near the stage interrupted them. Ramona looked up and saw the three musicians on stage stop playing and back away from their microphones. The taller woman with the bass looked angry, almost ready to fight. The shorter woman shifted her guitar behind her and said something to the bass player that Ramona couldn’t hear.

But the boy appeared completely terrified. Ramona looked down and spotted a man sporting cowboy regalia who seemed to be quite drunk. He was waving a chair around in one hand and shouting incoherently, and as he wove towards the stage his boots crunched broken glass. The waitress he’d knocked down and whose tray he’d bumped to the floor scrambled to get out of his way.

The dark-haired woman stood her ground and leaned into her microphone. “Security! Cleanup on aisle two!” The drunk with the chair stopped and looked around as the club patrons around him laughed nervously. He shouted something about disgracing country music with the song they’d been playing, then he dropped the chair and spun awkwardly towards the stage.

Just as he grabbed the front of the stage and slipped on the broken glass, two large men got to him and hauled him away. The bassist leaned into the microphone and said, “Sorry about that, folks. Didn’t know the gentleman felt so strongly about aviation.”

The audience laughed with her. “We’re going to take a two-minute break to get all situated again, then we’ll pick up where we left off. You folks enjoy yourselves ‘till we get back, okay?”

She unplugged her bass and followed the other two, who had already escaped backstage. Townsend turned back to the four women at his table. “That bunch is history. The manager of this club doesn’t tolerate acts who don’t perform. If I know anything about Doug Watson, they’re already fired.”

Connie rapped the table with her knuckles. “You were saying something about another option.”

“Yes, of course. The other option is to sign at least one or two of you to solo contracts. I’m sure I can find steady work for —”

Connie’s harsh voice broke in. “No.”

Townsend raised his hands. “I know that it sounds like this would break up the band, but it wouldn’t mean that the four of you couldn’t —”

This time Shamika said, “No.”

Townsend blinked and turned his head. “Ramona, you have to admit that this is —”

“No.” Ramona frowned and leaned forward. “I don’t have to admit anything. The Mountaintops are a group. You either sign the whole group or none of us.”

Jennifer looked stricken. “Ramona! Please! Mr. Townsend is —”

“Mr. Townsend is trying to make money with us and from us,” blurted Connie. “And I don’t blame him for it one bit. That’s what he’s in business to do. But there are other ways to do it than breaking up a good band.” She turned to face the man. “Mr. Townsend, I respect your position. I really do. I also respect the fact that you’re making these suggestions now and not later, when we’re contractually bound to you. It tells me that you’re as honest as a person can be in this business. And I understand why you’d make this offer to us, I really do. I hope you’re successful and you make a lot of money representing all the artists on your roster. But I’m with Ramona on this. You sign this group as a group or you sign none of us.”

“You got that right,” added Shamika.

The three of them turned to face Jennifer, who dropped her gaze and put her hands in her lap. Shamika, who sat closest to

her, reached out and gently held Jennifer by the upper arm. “Jen? You be with us on this, right?”

The silence held for a long moment. Then Jennifer lifted tear-filled eyes to the other three women at the table. “Don’t you understand? I’ve been waiting for a break like this for more than fifteen years! I’ve worked for it! I’ve gone hungry for it, traveled across the country for it, played in crappy dives and let ugly, stupid men ogle me and pinch my butt for it! I’m six years older than any of the rest of you and I don’t know how much time I’ve got left in this business! I’m not letting this chance go by! I — I just can’t!”

Shamika dropped both her hand and her jaw. Connie paled and pushed away from the table. Ramona ground her teeth together and managed to ask, “How long have you been planning this?”

“Please, Ramona, I never wanted —”

“How long!” she barked.

Jennifer dropped her gaze again. “Since — since we made this appointment two weeks ago. I wasn’t sure you’d go along with the changes Albert wanted to make, and —”

“Albert?” echoed Connie. “Since when is it ‘Albert’ instead of ‘Mr. Townsend,’ Jen?”

Townsend pushed back from the table and stood. “I can see that I’ve overstayed my welcome. I’m sorry to have caused so much trouble, ladies. I wish all of you the best. I really mean that, too, because you’re all excellent musicians, and I have no doubt that you will eventually succeed. I only regret that it won’t happen with my label.” He looked at Jennifer and extended his arm. “Are you coming, my dear? My office is only a few blocks away. We can get you signed up and start planning your new career immediately.”

Ramona lifted her hand. “Wait just a minute. Jennifer is under contract to the band, just like the rest of us. We’re all equal shareholders of the group, but we’re also employees of the group. She has a contractual obligation to play a two-week engagement starting Friday and we’re not letting her out of it.”

Townsend shook his head. “My legal staff can contact your legal representatives about this if you really want to do it that way, Ramona, and we can eventually work it out together. But I’ve already looked at the agreements you have with the Mountaintops’ corporation, and any employment is defined as ‘at will,’ which means that a majority of the members can fire any other member at any time. It also means that any member can leave the group at any time with a two-week notice. Lacking that notice, the member who leaves must forfeit his or her ownership of the corporation, which she’s willing to do. The only thing left is Jennifer’s twenty-five percent share of the band name, which she’s willing to surrender, and her portion of the copyrights for the songs she co-wrote with one or more of you, which she wants to keep. You can either accept the check I’ll have ready for you tomorrow in my office at ten to resolve the whole matter, or you can take legal action to force her to stay with you.”

Townsend lifted his hands to either side, then dropped them. “I’m sorry this has turned out this way. I really am. You can sue Jennifer — or me — if you really want to, but it would mean tying up your time and your assets in a court battle that no one would win. And I hate to say this, but I’ve got deeper pockets than you do and you would run out of money before I would. I’m truly sorry we couldn’t do business together.” He turned to Jennifer again and extended his arm.

Jennifer slowly stood and looked at each of the other women in turn without speaking. Then she nodded to Townsend and put her hand in his elbow.

The last sight Ramona had of Jennifer Bates was the back of her hennaed head as she walked out the door of the club.

Connie was livid. She’d followed Ramona and Shamika into

the ladies’ lounge of the club, but she’d refused to sit down with them on the couch in the front room. She took three steps in front of the couch, punched her palm with her other hand, then turned and repeated the pattern. As she paced, she enumerated the various ways she planned to make Jennifer deeply regret the actions she’d taken.

“Connie,” pleaded Ramona, “this isn’t helping! We have to figure out what we’re going to do come Friday. We still have to play a two-week gig and we don’t have a bass player.”

“Oh, the answer’s easy,” snarled Connie. “You know how proud Jennifer is of her tiny little shapely rear end? We’ll just threaten to shoot her in the butt — both cheeks — unless she comes back. And when she does, we’ll shove her in a box and only let her out to play.”

“Don’t think that’d work,” offered Shamika. “You know how much a port-a-potty would cost to put in a crate?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of a coffin with a lockable lid,” Connie growled back.

Shamika guffawed. “Jennifer the red-headed vampire queen! Hey, you know, I bet we could sell that. Make a real hot video, too. Maybe even a movie.”

“Ladies, please,” pleaded Ramona. “We have to come up with some idea as to what to do now. If we break this contract, we might as well quit the business.”

“Oh, sure,” barked Connie, “you can go back to grad school and finish your MBA and Sham can go back to being a CPA and I can go back to teaching little kids how to play ‘Red River Valley’ in between studio gigs! Well, I’m not ready to quit! So let’s figure something out!”

Before either Shamika or Connie could respond, the front door slammed open and the two young women from the trio stalked into the lounge. The shorter one all but shouted, “— can’t make him stay! If he wants to run home to Mommy he —”

She broke off as she realized that there were already others in the room. “Sorry,” said the taller one. “We didn’t mean to butt in. Got some — some boy trouble.”

Ramona crossed her arms. “You have our sincere sympathies. You guys never did come back on stage.”

The shorter woman’s face darkened. “No, we didn’t. Tim decided — in the middle of the freaking gig, no less! — that the life of a traveling musician wasn’t for him. He called his mother to buy him a plane ticket home. In an ironic twist worthy of Alanis Morissette, he really is leaving on a jet plane.” She crossed her arms and shook her head. “And we got fired.”

Connie’s eyes widened. “So that means you’re out of work?”

The taller stranger put her hands on her hips. “Unless ‘got fired’ means ‘held over and paid a bonus’ in your universe, yeah, we’re out of work. On top of no longer being the trio he hired, the manager didn’t like our choice of material.”

Ramona asked, “Why did you do the jet plane song, anyway? It’s not what I would have picked for this venue.”

“Me neither. But Tim insisted. He said that John Denver songs were popular everywhere.”

Shamika chuckled. “I guess what you don’t know can hurt you, huh?”

As the taller stranger frowned at Shamika and the shorter one grinned, Connie turned to Ramona and twitched her head at the two newcomers. Ramona frowned, uncomprehending, so Connie faked a sneeze, covered her mouth with one hand, and blurted out, “Newbassplayer!”

The newcomers looked at each other as if wondering what asylum they’d invaded. The taller one gestured with her hands out and said, “Look, we’re sorry we interrupted — whatever it was we interrupted. We’ll be on our way now and you —”

Shamika laughed. “Y’all don’t get all weirded out, okay? Connie just tryin’ to tell us to ask you about playin’ with us.”

The two women’s frowns turned into jaw-dropping

amazement. “What? Play with you?”

“Yeah. They some four-dollar word for stuff happenin’ that turn out good when it don’t look like it will at the time.”

The taller stranger narrowed her eyes. “Serendipity?” she offered.

“Yeah! That’s it. Anyway, since you got no job and we got no bass player, what do you say?”

Ramona turned to her. “Sham, aren’t you jumping the gun here? We don’t know if she even wants to play with us. And you don’t know if Connie and I want her to play with us.”

Shamika laughed again and waved her arm at the two newcomers. “You was just saying about how hard it gonna be finding a new bass player on short notice. And one come walkin’ in the bathroom at just the right time! That gotta be seren — ser —”

“Serendipity,” supplied Ramona.

“Yeah! And it’s a drop-dead cinch we don’t want to hire no horny guy tryin’ to look down our shirts or catch us changin’ clothes for the next two weeks.” She stood and offered her hand to the dark-haired newcomer. “I’m Shamika Jones. The classy blond there is Connie Vandross — no relation to Luther — and the cautious one with the pretty brown hair is Ramona Wilcox. How about you?”

The dark-haired woman kept her hands at her sides. “If you hire me, you hire both of us. We’re a package deal.”

Ramona shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. We’re in the market for a bass player, not a merger with a busted band.”

The dark-haired beauty’s eyes snapped. “We aren’t busted! We still have our equipment and some contacts. If we need to, we can find work as a duet. You don’t want us, we won’t starve.”

Ramona sighed. “It’s not that we don’t want both of you, it’s just that we’re used to working as a quartet, not a quintet. Putting a fifth person in the group changes the dynamic.”

The dark-haired woman frowned and crossed her arms. “It goes both ways. We all get together, it changes our dynamic too. Maybe we don’t want to be part of something so large and unwieldy.”

Ramona’s eyes narrowed and her fists found her hips. “Oh, really? How’s that trio gig working out for you? Or don’t you want the work?”

“Hey, hang on here!” Connie called out. “We just left solo contracts and guaranteed studio work on the table out there because of loyalty to each other and to the group. These ladies are doing exactly the same thing we did, Ramona. I think we should give them a shot.”

“I don’t know —”

“Look,” said the shorter stranger, “if you don’t like what we do, no harm done. If we don’t fit with your style, we don’t fit, no problem. But you’re right, we could use the work, and you apparently need one other person. Putting me in the mix just makes the whole band that much more flexible. If you were out there when we started our set, you know what the two of us can do.” She stopped and tilted her head to one side. “Say, what’s this job for, anyway?”

“Two weeks at Marlowe’s,” answered Connie, “starting Friday night. How fast do you pick up new arrangements?”

The taller one finally smiled. “My sister and I are quick studies. You girls play originals or covers or a mix?”

“For this gig, it’s covers with one or two originals a night. You two play just country or do you branch out?”

The shorter one answered, “We can play acoustic or electric, rock, blues, jazz — I’m really good at the jazz stuff and she can play almost anything — and I can play classical piano if you have a need for it. And if your drummer gets sick, I can fill in.”

“You got a deep-seated need to play lead guitar?” asked Connie.

“Not unless you have a similar deep-seated need for me to

play lead. I don’t mind playing whatever it takes for the band to succeed.”

Shamika put her hand out again. “Sounds good to me! Pleased to meet you ladies.”

The taller one finally took Shamika’s hand in hers. “And we’re glad to meet you. My name’s Lois Lane and this is my sister Lucy.”

Ramona shook her head and chuckled ruefully. “Okay, okay. Let’s see if we can make some beautiful music together. At least for the duration.”

Lois released Shamika’s hand and took Ramona’s. “Hey, if not, at least we get to eat regularly for two weeks.”

Shamika took Lucy’s hand and looked the smaller woman up and down. “Look like you could use regular eatin’, girl. Might fill you out a bit.”

Lucy cocked one eyebrow and retorted, “I still have the Styrofoam packing that came with my pedalboard. If you want it, woman, I’ll loan it to you so you can stuff it under your shirt. Might fill you out a bit.”

Shamika froze in place for a long moment, then a smile crawled across her face. “Jazz girl, I think you and me gonna get along just fine.”

The other three relaxed. Connie turned and winked at Ramona. “This is gonna be fun!”

“Great,” sighed Ramona. “As if I don’t have enough fun in my life as it is.”

>>>> Bassist Bates Leaves Mountaintops

>>>> for Solo Career

>>>> Rockin’ Mountain News

>>>> January 11, 1992

Jennifer Bates, vocalist and bassist for the Mountaintops, has left the group to pursue a solo career. Bates has signed a three-album contract with Incredible Records and will be entering the studio to begin work on her first project in May. According to her new manager, Albert Townsend of Incredible Records, she will spend the time between now and then working on new songs and selecting the members of her touring band. Townsend anticipates that the first album will be completed in time for Jennifer’s summer tour.

“It’s too bad the other ladies wouldn’t or couldn’t take this step with Jennifer,” laments Townsend. “I’m sorry to see such a popular band split up, but this is the music business, and you have to go where the business takes you.”

The split marks the end of a three-year odyssey for the quartet, one which began in a club in Los Angeles when local studio legend Connie Vandross began jamming onstage with drummer Shamika Jones at the Blue Oyster. Within a week, both Ramona Wilcox and Jennifer Bates had joined the pair and the four had begun rehearsals as a working band. Their first album was sabotaged by poor production values and conflict over both the direction of the band and credit for the original songs they recorded, but by the end of the first year they had learned to work together. The group has been on the road for most of the time since then, with only the occasional hiatus. This is the first time that any member of the group has announced a permanent separation from the band.

Bates insists that the split from the Mountaintops was amicable. “I wish those girls all the best,” says Bates. “They’re all so very talented and we worked so well together. It’s a shame that I had to leave in order to fulfill my true potential. The Mountaintops were a part of my life for almost three years, and I’m going to miss them. And don’t count them out just because I’m no longer with them. They’ll be just fine.”

When contacted, Ramona Wilcox of the Mountaintops had no comment except to confirm Bates’ departure. When asked if the Mountaintops would disband, she insisted that the group would go on with their next scheduled engagement.

“The Mountaintops are not disbanding. We are moving forward with both our lineup changes and our bookings. We’re currently auditioning a new bassist and we’re considering adding another person who can play both guitar and keyboards to add versatility. We are also looking for a studio where we can lay down tracks for our next album.”

Elvis Schafer, booking manager for Marlowe’s in Denver, confirmed that the club had booked the Mountaintops for the next two weeks. Schafer said that he knew of Bates’ separation from the group, and that Wilcox had informed him of the change before the engagement began. Schafer also expressed confidence in the band’s ability to please the club’s customers, despite the new lineup.

>>>> Falling from the Mountaintop

>>>> Rockin’ Mountain News

>>>> February 2, 1992

>>>> by Joaquin Flores

The news shocked me when I first heard it almost a month ago. Jennifer Bates was leaving the Mountaintops? That vivacious redhead would no longer dominate the stage with her bass and her voice? The band was breaking up? Couldn’t be! The all-female quartet was too good, too close to hitting the big time to quit now! What had happened to them? Surely the problems weren’t so huge that they couldn’t repair them! They couldn’t split, not now!

But they had. Jennifer is no longer part of the band. She’s working on a solo career now, and some say she’s destined for stardom, that she might even edge Madonna aside the next time they hand out those Grammys.

But why? Why had Jennifer left? What was the real reason? I needed to find out.

I managed to catch up to the other three Mountaintops in Denver on the second night of a two-week stint at Marlowe’s. The first thing I noticed was that there were now five of them. The stage seemed a little crowded and the group seemed awkward. The new bassist, Lois Lane, can’t belt it out like Jennifer can, nor did her playing have the same edge that night. And the new guitarist/keyboardist, whose name I didn’t catch then, was just trying to find her way with the rest of the band. Still, I thought, they don’t sound bad, they just don’t sound like the Mountaintops I’d fallen in love with two years before.

I finally scheduled an interview with the group the day of their last show at Marlowe’s, and I was glad I did. All five women were laughing and joking with each other as the sound check broke up, trading barbs and teasing each other like old friends. When I got Connie Vandross alone to ask her about the differences between their current lineup and their old one, she smiled.

“Jennifer was and is a fantastic talent,” she insisted, “but she was always a little bit of a diva. If one of us got more vocal time than she did, you can bet we’d all hear about it. It was hard not to let her have her way because she’s so good, but Lois is just as skilled as Jennifer, and she doesn’t seem to care who gets how much mic time. And her sister is a joy to play with, too.”

Sister? “Yes. Lois and her younger sister Lucy. They’re fourteen months and three days apart and they won’t let us forget it, either. They used to be the Fast Lanes until they had a disaster similar to ours, except theirs happened onstage and they lost the third member of their group. Not lost like dead,” she laughed, “just like quit and gone home. We needed a bass player, they needed a job, and so we all agreed to give it a try here for two weeks.”

I asked her how it was working out and she laughed again.

“You’re kidding, right? Have you heard us lately?”

I admitted that I’d only caught one show on their second night.

“Then you have to come and hear us tonight! Ugh! We stunk our first couple of shows. I mean we were really bad. We were trying to force Lois into Jennifer’s slot, and she’s just not Jennifer.” She stopped and chuckled. “Actually, that’s not at all a bad thing. But we had to figure out how not to step on each other, both musically and literally. It took some time and some hard work.

“But all that’s changed now, ‘cause we have it figured out. Lucy and I are going to rip it up on ‘Still The One’ tonight! You know those snaky dual lines Orleans played on that song? Lucy and I have them beat by a mile! She’s so much fun to play with. She and Lois both just want the song to succeed and they don’t care who’s out front as long as the song works.”

I asked her about Jennifer’s departure and she smiled, then shook her lovely blond mane.

“You’ll have to talk to Mama Mona about that. Us little peons don’t discuss band business with outsiders. Look, I have to get back. You’re coming tonight, right? Maybe you can catch Ramona after the show.”

I stayed. And I’m glad that I did.

Everything Connie had told me about the new lineup was true, and she hadn’t told me a quarter of what they could do now. With Jennifer Bates on bass, the Mountaintops could rock with the best of them, but with Lois Lane on bass their sound is somehow broader and smoother without losing one iota of power. And Lucy Lane does indeed complement Connie on guitar, but I thought the whole band took off when they combined Lucy’s keyboards with Ramona’s piano and sent “I’m So Excited” into the stratosphere. With Lois, Connie, and drummer Shamika Jones on vocals, and with Lois and Connie dancing across the stage during the piano break, they brought down the house and then put it back together again. And with five voices, the group can sing harmonies that were impossible before.

I did manage to catch Ramona just after the show, and she agreed to chat with me for a few minutes. I asked her if Jennifer’s version of the split was accurate.

She frowned at me and shook her head. “I’m not going to start a war of words with Jennifer or anyone else from Incredible Records,” she insisted. “I’m not happy that Jen left us the way she did, but things seem to have worked out for the best for all concerned.”

I asked if she meant that Jennifer had left without giving notice.

I was reminded that Ramona doesn’t like to repeat herself. “Were you not listening to me, Joaquin? What did I just tell you?” When I pressed her to either confirm or deny that Jennifer’s departure was an ‘amicable split,’ she frowned again.

“The only thing I’m going to say on the subject is that we’re extremely fortunate to have connected with Lois and Lucy Lane. Jennifer’s departure has changed our look and our sound, and I understand if our fans aren’t all that happy with the difference. But if they’ll give us a chance, I think they’ll see that we have just as much to offer them now as we did before, if not more. Lucy and Lois are fantastic musicians, and I think we’re going to make our mark on the business very soon.”

I wondered aloud if Jennifer’s new album deal was a problem for the remaining Mountaintops.

“You’d have to ask the others that question, but as for me I’m not upset. I hope Jen does very well. She certainly has the talent for it, and I wish her all the best.”

I remarked that there had been rumors of problems between Connie and Jennifer over the past few months.

“I don’t know where you heard that,” she growled at me. “Connie and Jennifer got along as well as two women cooped up in a tour bus for nine months out of the year could. Sure, they had their differences, but what band doesn’t? I’ve had arguments with all three of the others at times, but we always solved the

problems internally.”

I mentioned Jennifer’s departure as evidence to the contrary.

Her eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms. “You’re starting to be a pest, Joaquin. Look, you can either refuse to accept what I’ve told you and go back to Jennifer for another juicy quote, or you can believe my version of the story and print it. Either way, none of us is going to slam Jennifer Bates in print to boost your circulation.”

At that, she stood and walked away. As I turned to go, I saw the band’s new bassist walking in my direction. I stopped her and asked about Jennifer.

Lois shrugged. “I’ve never met her, so I can’t tell you a thing about her. All I know is that my sister and I are with the Mountaintops for the duration of this engagement.”

I asked, “You mean you’re not officially part of the band?”

“No. That’s what we all agreed when we took the gig. But Lucy and I are meeting with the others tomorrow at lunch to discuss our future with them — which I really hope we have, because these ladies are terrific people and wonderful musicians — but nothing’s written in stone yet. Check back with us tomorrow afternoon. We may have a breaking story for you.”

I did. And they did. Lois and Lucy Lane are now officially part of the Mountaintops. And I cannot say enough about the level of talent and high degree of professionalism displayed by these two young women. They are definitely an asset to the group and can only get better as time goes on.

Some of the band’s fans have expressed concern or dismay at the direction the group is taking, but I think they’re doing the right thing. It’s my considered opinion that the Mountaintops will regain their place in the hearts and minds of their many fans and go on to make many more. The fallout from the split with Jennifer won’t go away immediately, and it will probably slow them down a little, but if this quintet follows the course they’ve laid out, they’ll be just fine.

>>>> Call Me Irresponsible

October 1993

Lucy threw the dressing room door open hard enough to crack it. “Arrgh!”

Lois pushed her into the room. “Cut it out, Luce! That’s enough!”

Lucy spun and faced her sister. “Christie did that on purpose and you know it! We all told her — every one of us told her — don’t get crazy with the ending! Do it like we rehearsed it! But no, the great Christie Baldwin just can’t be part of the band! She has to be Number One all the time!” She snarled something unrecognizable but nonetheless profane. “‘You Made Me Love You’ was NOT written just so she could show off her vocal dynamics!”

“I know that! But you also know how she is after she does a couple of lines! The coke makes her think she’s Whitney Houston performing at the Grammys!”

“Then why do we put up with her? Why do we let her bust up the show over and over again? You wanna explain that to me?”

Connie leaned into the doorway. “Hey, you two, keep it down! The customers can hear you yelling at each other.”

Lois huffed. “Sorry, Connie, we just —”

Lucy stepped around her sister to face Connie. “Doesn’t it make you mad that Christie stepped all over your ending? You worked on that line for an hour!”

Connie’s beauty-queen quality smile shifted into a frown. “Of course it bothers me, but what can I do? The management of the Metro Club doesn’t ask the guitar player to coach the featured singer.”

Lucy stomped her feet twice. “We have to do something!”

Tall and broad-shouldered, Shamika Jones breezed past the other two women and bumped Lucy off-balance with one

muscular arm. “Shut the freak up, jazz girl! You get fired, you take your stuff with you, and then I gotta go buy me a new drum kit that ain’t as broke in as yours is.”

Lucy turned and glared up into the taller woman’s face. “Yeah? You want me to pick one out for you, rocker woman? Maybe we can start with one of those kiddie sets. They’re cheap, too, and you don’t have to worry about what cymbal to hit on what song ‘cause there’s only one.”

“Ha! Ain’t like I use all them cymbals you got up there anyway.”

“They’re for playing jazz and every one of them sounds great!”

“Great jazz? Is that what they’re callin’ that stuff nowadays?”

“You wouldn’t know a splash from a crash if you dove into it, rocker woman!”

“Oh, yeah, jazz girl? Who was it gave you your first set of Hot Rods ‘cause you playin’ too loud?”

“I’m not the one who blows the rest of us off the stage with her twin kick pedals!”

It was an old argument, one which always produced sound and fury but also always signified nothing, and Lois was relieved that it seemed to distract Lucy from her rant about Christie. She took the opportunity to slip out of the dressing room and try to find Toni Taylor, the club’s manager and designated babysitter for Christie Baldwin, self-designated vocalist extraordinaire. She bumped into Ramona Wilcox, the band’s main pianist and business manager. “Hey, Mona. Christie still out there soaking up the applause?”

Ramona tossed her dark hair over her shoulder and snorted. “She’s in the office. Toni is trying to get her calmed down enough to do the next set.”

“Think she’ll make it?”

Ramona sighed. “I don’t think so, but she’s fooled me before. I swear, that girl’s gonna rot both her brain and her liver with all that garbage she ingests. Wouldn’t surprise me if she folded up on stage one night and died hitting a high note.”

Lois nodded in commiseration. “I know. Hey, at least we’d get great reviews for it. ‘Singer gives her life for her art. Film at eleven.’ Wouldn’t that be a great draw?”

Ramona laughed. “Lois, you are too funny. You ought to write ad copy for us. Maybe we’d get more music fans and fewer butt-grabbers in here.”

“Oh, right, that’ll happen. You do know that most of the regulars are mobbed up, don’t you?”

“Ooh, what sharp teeth you have, Grandma! Don’t let Johnny Taylor hear you say stuff like that. You’d be out of here on your bass so fast you wouldn’t have time to tune it.”

“Johnny fires any one of us, he fires all of us. It’s in the contract.”

“Uh-huh. Like any contract that doesn’t have to do with killing people means anything to anybody here.”

“Hey, don’t let Toni hear you say that. And especially not Johnny.”

Ramona chuckled and tapped Lois on the shoulder with her fist. “Okay, I hear you.”

“You should. You said it first.”

“Well, ain’t I the smart one? Come on, we got to get everything lined up for the rock-n-roll set. Connie has to have her effects pedals just so or she can’t find them.”

Lois sighed. “I don’t know why she can’t just get a little fluorescent light to shine on her pedals. That way she could at least see which one is which.”

“I’ve suggested that before. Connie always says it would kill her night vision and make it harder to dodge the drunks and the bottles they throw. But I think she just likes the attention.”

“Maybe so.” Lois chuckled. “At least she’s straight and sober.”

“Yeah, Eric Clapton should be so clean.”

The band members stood to one side of the stage behind the curtain, looking around nervously. Connie and Lucy kept checking their watches.

Lois couldn't stand it any more. “How long till curtain?”

Lucy sighed. “Two minutes and counting. I swear, if Christie shows up fried at the last minute, I'm gonna go all Pete Townsend on her head with my guitar.”

Connie grinned. “You could just sic George on her.”

“George?” scoffed Lucy. “You mean George McDermott? That nice old man? George is such an old softy he'd fluff her pillow and offer her a chocolate mint.”

“At least her breath would smell nice,” Connie retorted.

Lucy rolled her eyes silently. Shamika leaned closer. “Y'all all tuned up?”

Connie nodded. “Concert pitch, all of us. These guitars and the ones already on stage. How about you?”

“My drums is always in tune,” drawled Shamika.

“Whose drums?” asked Lucy.

“It's my snare and my floor tom,” said Shamika. “And like I told you already, I don't use all them cymbals anyhow.”

Ramona's head snapped around. “Here comes somebody.”

Toni Taylor stepped through the backstage doorway and leaned close. “I'm sorry, ladies, but Christie is too sick to sing. What can we do about this?”

Lucy snorted. “Too sick! Yeah, right.”

Lois leaned closer and all but growled in her ear, “Shut up, Punky!”

Shamika tapped her sticks together twice. “Okay, people, we can handle this. We just got to go to Plan B.”

Ramona nodded. “Right. Toni, we can do this set, but you have to let us put Lois out in front for the ballads and the slower stuff and let Connie and me share the lead vocals on the other tunes.”

Toni frowned. “You know my brother doesn't want anyone to replace Christie.”

Connie sighed. “We're not replacing her, we're substituting for her. Besides, the girl is totally unreliable and you know it. We've been ready for this ever since the third day of the gig.”

Toni's frown flowed into something approaching amusement. “Just putting together a contingency plan, right?”

Connie nodded and grinned impishly. “Absolutely. You never know when your lead singer is going to yell through a screen door and strain her voice.”

Toni quirked one eyebrow upwards. “Okay. I'll tell him I gave you the go-ahead. Maybe that'll take the edge off his reaction.” She snapped her fingers once and pointed at each of the musicians in turn. “Knock 'em dead, girls!”

“Thanks, Toni!” Ramona turned to the others as Toni withdrew. “Okay, we start with ‘China Grove.’ Connie, you got the lead vocal, right?”

“Right. You and Lois and Lucy on backup vocals.”

Lucy piped up. “Lois, you make sure you catch that C-sharp on the hook. I'm still not playing it loud enough to cut through by myself when the rest of you come in.”

“Can't you just boost your amp's low end?”

“If I had a Strat, maybe, but I play a Les Paul, remember? Humbucking pickups, fat tone, lots of low end already? I need a short-scale instrument for my lovely petite hands. And my sound gets too muddy if I boost the low on my Marshall any more than it already is.”

“Okay, Luce, fine! Whatever! Ramona, the next song is ‘Sultans of Swing,’ right, with Lucy on lead vocal?”

“If Connie can play it, yeah,” smirked Lucy.

“Just watch me! I'll play it so good I'll make Mark Knopfler roll over in his grave!”

“Knopfler isn't dead, Connie,” replied Ramona.

“Then that'll be a really neat trick, won't it?”

Ramona rolled her eyes and sighed theatrically. “Shamika, you lead us into ‘Puppet Man’ next so we can show off our sweet harmonies, and then we slow it down a little. Lois, you got the lead on the soft arrangement of ‘Me And Bobby McGee’ after that, then we'll stop and introduce ourselves.”

Lois reached into the middle of the group. “We'll check with you for song cues from then on. Everybody get a hand in!”

Each woman grasped right hands in the middle of the huddle. Lois said, “Tonight we show them that we don't need Christie Baldwin to sound great. Tonight we strut our stuff. Tonight we show them who the Mountaintops are! ‘Mountaintops’ on three!”

In unison, they chanted, “One-two-three-Mountaintops!”

They carried their guitars on stage as they danced to their marks and plugged in. The curtain came up as Connie stepped to her microphone. “Good evening, everyone, and welcome to the Metro Club! We're the Mountaintops, and we hope you can hang on because it's gonna be a fun ride! Kick it off, Sham!”

One-two-three-and-four stick taps from Shamika led Lucy and Connie into the opening guitar hook of the Doobie Brothers' “China Grove.” The sound leaped off the stage as Ramona's nimble piano joined in, followed by Shamika's drums and Lois's bass.

The dancing started almost immediately, even before Connie began singing, and the waitresses couldn't keep the drinks coming fast enough. The club needed another regular bartender, one who wasn't in jail awaiting trial for six counts of burglary.

They didn't know it, but the man they needed had just walked in the front door.

Clark winced as the band on stage started their first song. They were good, but they were also loud, and he had to deliberately turn his hearing down to something approaching a normal level. His disguise was effective — he hoped — and no one there would recognize him as an investigative reporter for the Daily Planet.

Toni Taylor leaned close to him and asked, “You said you're looking for a job, Mr. King?”

Clark nodded. “Call me Charlie. Yeah, I need a job. The freighter I was crewin' on sailed before I got paid yesterday and I don't have enough bread to wait around at the post office for my last check. I gotta get some work somewhere, and I'm tired of bein' out in the weather and all.”

She smiled. “Have you done any bartending?”

“Yeah, some. Not in any place this fancy, but I can make just about anything anybody wants to pour down their gullets.”

She nodded. “What would you do if someone who looked underage came up to the bar?”

He glanced around. “I don't see no signs sayin' we gonna card anybody.”

She smiled wider. “Good answer. Since this is a private club, we serve whatever is ordered to whoever orders it. It's the responsibility of the club members, not the staff, to make sure their — companions — are old enough and sober enough to drink what they ask for. Tell me, Charlie, do you have a place to sleep?”

“I got a cheap motel room not far from here. I can walk here in fifteen minutes if you need me to come in early.”

“How very eager and industrious of you.” She leaned back and looked him over again, then nodded. “You can start tomorrow afternoon at two. You can pick up your uniform then.”

“Thanks. I'll be here.”

“Wait. Aren't you going to ask about your pay?”

“Nah. I trust you to be fair, and I know I'll get good tips in a joint this classy. Besides, it ain't like I got a lot of options.”

She straightened. “I understand. In that case, why don't you

go back to the kitchen and wash up? I'll have the cook bring you some dinner." She pointed to a small unoccupied table beside the kitchen door. "Have a seat there when you're done. What kind of beer do you like?"

He shrugged. "If I ain't payin' for it, I like 'em all."

She smiled wide. "Right. I'll send over something."

"Thanks, ma'am. You won't regret this, I promise."

"You'd best see that I don't."

Toni turned to leave, then turned and leaned close again.

"What do you think of the band?"

"Them girls up there on stage?" She nodded to him. "They're pretty good. Great vocal sound, and they play with each other instead of against each other. They the house band?"

"No. They're the Mountaintops. We brought them in to play behind Christie Baldwin, but she's sick tonight. They can go on without her if they have to."

He shrugged. "They sound like they don't have to have her up there with them."

"They look pretty good, too, don't they?"

He looked back at the stage and smiled wide, then he nodded to her again, this time more enthusiastically. "They sure do look good. They look real good. 'Specially the dark-haired one on bass."

"Don't you like blond guitarists?"

"Sure. It's just — everybody got different tastes, I guess. Yeah, they all look good."

Her face hardened and she leaned into his personal space. "Understand this: you can look all you want but you don't touch. Not ever. You got that?"

He backed up a half step. "Yeah. I mean, yes, ma'am, I got it."

"Because if you do, you'll answer to my brother Johnny. And he's not the nice one in the family."

He lifted his hands. "I surrender! Look, Ms. Taylor, I promise. I won't touch none of them girls! I won't even talk to 'em 'less you give me the high sign!"

She relaxed slightly. "You can talk to them all you want as long as it's just business. But no guy-girl stuff! We have a strict no-fraternization policy here. Got that?"

"I got it! I promise!"

"Good." She morphed back into the friendly club manager she'd appeared to be at first. "Then you go get cleaned up and we'll get some quality food in you. We take good care of our people, Charlie."

"Yes, ma'am."

The band ended their first tune to raucous applause, then swung into the D-minor intro to "Sultans of Swing." Clark took one last look at the five attractive young women rocking on the stage, their faces alight with the joy of making music. Then he turned and headed for the kitchen and a free meal, dodging dancers and waitresses on his way.

Linda King leaned over his shoulder and put her hands on his upper arms. "So how'd it go at the Metro Club last night, Clark?"

"I start this afternoon as the new bartender."

She turned him around in his chair, then reached out and stroked his fake beard. "I like it," she purred. "Too bad it's not real. Maybe you could grow a real one after this assignment's over. You'd look even better than you do already."

He leaned away while trying not to look like he was leaning away. "I'll think about it, okay, Linda?"

Perry popped out of his office and bellowed, "King! Kent! In here now!"

Clark let Linda go first and closed the door behind them. "What's up, Perry?"

"Sit down, you two. I want a report on this investigation at the Metro Club."

Linda looked at Clark and nodded slightly. "I got hired as a replacement bartender. I start today at two o'clock."

"Good. You got a crummy motel room for cover?"

"Crummiest one the Planet could afford."

Linda giggled louder than the joke warranted, then trailed off as Perry stared her down. "Okay, Linda, you're going in as a waitress, right?"

"I'm waiting for a call back, but I think Linda Wannamaker is a shoo-in. They're short a couple of girls, thanks to the latest police sweep for freelance hookers, and the club's legitimate business is booming. Besides, they're suckers for young abandoned wives who can't find their no-good husbands. There are at least two other waitresses there in that situation. I should be able to leverage them for information pretty easily."

"Good. Now you two need to learn whatever you can, but you also need to keep your heads down. The Taylors and their buddies play for keeps and they don't like people nosing around their business. Got that?"

They both nodded. "Okay. Remember, if you feel like you're in any danger at all, pull out and report back here on the double! I don't want anyone getting hurt over this."

Linda frowned. "I don't want either of us getting hurt either, Chief."

"Let's keep it that way. Now get back to work."

Linda stood but found her way blocked by Clark. "Perry," he asked, "is there any way to spot this Wanda Detroit character? It would make our job a lot easier if we had someone there who was already on the inside."

Perry shook his head. "I already told you, I don't even know who this woman is. I can't even be sure it is a woman, although that's how the writer describes herself. She writes stories exposing the gangsters who operate on the East Coast club circuit, includes names and dates and transactions and crimes committed, and sends them to me and a couple of other editors she's decided to trust. And no, we can't backtrack the stuff through the mail. It all comes from a post office box in Gotham City, and they get their stuff from several different U-Mail-It places up and down the East Coast. Believe me, if I could bring her in from the cold, I'd do it."

"You haven't been able to track her down?"

Perry tilted his head in mild exasperation. "You doubt my abilities, Mr. Kent? Or maybe you doubt my influence? Or is it my age that induces you to suggest that I don't know what I'm doing?"

"Whoa, Chief, wait a minute! I'm sorry I —"

Perry pulled a handful of manila envelopes out from under another stack on his desk. "These are from Wanda Detroit." He displayed the address label on the first one. "The return address says it's from Samantha Clemens in Calaveras County, Missouri. That's actually my personal favorite." He dropped it back onto the desk. "This one is from Joe Green in Little Italy, Massachusetts. Italy, Guiseppie Verdi, do you get the pun? 'Joe Green' being the translation of Guiseppie Verdi from the Italian?"

"I'm very sorry that I doubted your ability to —"

"This last one is very interesting. It's allegedly from George Sand in Le Havre, France. And the story that came in this envelope put two contract murderers behind bars for a long, long time." He slapped it down atop the others. "Assuming Wanda really is a woman, she's smart and cagey and probably tougher than a fifty-cent steak. No one's been able to backtrack her for the last two years and change, not even the FBI."

Clark raised his hands in surrender. "I give up! She's smarter than all of us put together."

Perry sighed. "I'm sorry, Kent, but this case is more than a little bit frustrating. I've never met her, but I feel like I know her. And I'm worried about her. I don't even know if she's anywhere near the Metro Club, but it's one of the few places in the

Northeast she hasn't written anything about yet. If she's still in business, she might be taking a look at Johnny Taylor's business. And that's not exactly a safe occupation."

Clark nodded. "I know. I hope she's still safe too. How long has it been since you've heard from her?"

"About three weeks. But she's done this before, son. She doesn't keep a regular work schedule like we do. Speaking of which, don't the two of you have some regular work to finish up here before you go to work?"

Clark smiled. "On it, Chief."

On their way out the door, Linda bumped him with her elbow and said, "Hey, how about an early lunch before we dive into that den of iniquity this afternoon? My treat."

Clark sighed. She wouldn't stop chasing him and he was getting tired of it. In fact, he thought she'd become more aggressive in the past few weeks. She seemed to view his continued refusals as challenges to try harder.

He almost said 'no,' but then the thought that she might do better work if she were in a good mood made him change her mind. "Okay. But somewhere on this side of town. We don't want to compromise our undercover identities."

She smiled. "Great! You pick the place. And I love it when you talk like J. Edgar Hoover, all that 'undercover identities' kind of stuff. It's so sexy!"

Before he could object to being called 'sexy' yet again, she turned and strode to her desk. He sighed and sat down to work on the assignment Perry had given him.

And the assignment was frustrating to him, too, because he was supposed to find out more about the character whom the TV stations had dubbed the "Silent Vigilante." All Clark had seen or read about the man was that he dressed all in black, wore a ski mask or a watch cap pulled low, and gloves. And he stopped criminals in the act.

The police had no consistent description of the man. His victims and the people whom he rescued had described him as Caucasian or Oriental, between six feet and six feet ten inches tall, with almost superhuman strength and agility and speed, and he never seriously injured the crooks he captured. The man was becoming a folk hero in Metropolis, and for the first time Clark was struck by the similarities between the Silent Vigilante and Wanda Detroit. Both of them worked for justice from behind the scenes, and no one but themselves knew their real identities.

Clark's frustration with the assignment derived from the fact that he was being asked to report on himself. He couldn't allow people to be hurt just because he wasn't a police officer or a fireman. He'd felt stifled at being unable to fight injustice with more than the printed word — although he was becoming more and more adept at it as the days passed — so one night he'd quickly pulled on jeans and a black shirt and a woolen cap and prevented a gang rape near Suicide Slum. The pair of police cruisers had arrived in time to take the unconscious attackers into custody and had escorted the young woman to the hospital for a checkup. It was his bad luck that she'd cornered a TV reporter who was filming a segment for a feature on late-night emergency room use. It was likely that without that exposure, the woman's story might never have been heard outside her circle of friends and her family.

The story had taken on a life of its own after that, and people had claimed rescue by the Vigilante when Clark had been asleep in bed or on a stakeout for the paper or rescuing someone else. He didn't consider it a valid choice to allow people to suffer injury or even death if he could prevent it without blowing his cover. And he was afraid that if his identity was in danger of being revealed, he'd have to leave again.

There were even reports of the Vigilante being in more than one place at a time, of using non-lethal weapons, and being described in ways Clark knew he'd never appeared. Maybe there

were copycats out there trying to emulate him. Maybe that was an angle he could present to Perry, that people were doing something about crime in their city when they probably should have been dialing 9-1-1 instead. That approach would divert attention from him, but he didn't know if doing that would encourage more copycats or not. And since the Vigilante was trying to keep people from being hurt, Clark definitely didn't want to put others in harm's way just to keep his boss off his back.

He reviewed the few notes he'd taken. Officially, the police department denied his existence and discouraged people from taking on criminals themselves. Public sentiment seemed to be fairly evenly divided between near hero worship or fear that he was planning to set up some kind of criminal empire and was engaged in clearing out the competition. It meant that he had to be even more careful to keep his identity a secret.

And now Perry was asking him to do exactly the opposite, to find the Silent Vigilante and unmask him. Dissected like a frog, indeed. More like being torn in two.

Linda perched on the edge of her chair and began flipping through the file folder in front of her, but her mind wasn't on her work. She was focused on Clark, and even though she wasn't looking directly at him she knew where he was and what he was doing.

It was a little scary. Never in her life had she met a man who had the power to bring her to her knees but refused to use that power. No matter how many signals she sent him, he didn't react. No matter how blatantly she flirted, he never responded. He was, as Perry had described him to her when she'd been hired, the quintessential Boy Scout. And because she didn't have him, she wanted him desperately.

She grinned as she thought of their first meeting, then wiped her face clean. She couldn't allow that memory to distract her from her job, even if it was one of her favorites.

He'd been so embarrassed when she'd answered the knock at her apartment door, wrapped in a towel and still wet from her shower. She'd thought he was her blind date to the White Orchid ball, but Morgan had stood her up and she'd cajoled Clark into escorting her before she'd known that Perry had hired him the day before. Clark had come by to ask her about some story notes from a fellow rookie reporter and had gotten more than he'd bargained for.

Whether or not she ever actually got to first base with him — or even into the batter's box — he was still one of the best writers she'd ever met. Even as a newbie at the Planet herself, as soon as she read his first story, the one on the theatre demolition, she'd known that he could help her professionally, and when they'd met she'd known that he could also help her personally.

But it hadn't happened, at least not yet. They hadn't progressed beyond friendly smiles and his gentlemanly ways, but they would. She was sure of it.

They didn't call her 'Lucky Linda' for nothing, and it was a nickname she cherished. She was lucky in love, lucky at cards, and lucky in her chosen profession. At least, she wanted to believe it was luck. If success was due to hard work and talent, then she might one day be unmasked as a fraud, a faker, a con artist of the highest degree with no real talent or ability. The thought terrified her.

So she pretended that it all came easily to her, that all the scholastic honors and the professional awards had simply dropped into her lap as she walked around in a happy daze. She pretended that she never lost sleep over a story, never agonized over a potentially actionable statement, never worried that someone else could do her job better than she could with less effort and for less money. She pretended to herself that she'd never overheard the nerdy little gofer refer to her as 'Pit Bull King' that day in the snack room.

Her cell phone rang and she looked at the incoming number display. Her call from the Metro Club was coming in. She stood and sprinted to the ladies' room to make sure no one on the other end heard anything they shouldn't from her side of the conversation.

She came out ten minutes later, smiling. She'd been hired and would report for work at four o'clock that day. There was just enough time for her to put a little more pressure on Clark before he had to leave for his new 'job.'

Lucky again.

>>>> The Way You Look Tonight

Lois could hear Johnny yelling through his office door even before she stepped into the hallway. He was definitely in a lousy mood today, and no wonder. His mildly talented but often strung-out girlfriend had missed the evening show the night before, and Johnny hadn't been there to 'fix' things for her. The Mountaintops had played without her, and by all accounts had done a bang-up job. The wait staff had reported more money in tips than at any time in the previous four weeks of the band's scheduled six-week booking. And the girls in the band had had fun, more fun than they'd had while Christie had fronted them since the first two nights of the gig.

But Christie hadn't sung with them, which was guaranteed to anger Johnny Taylor, son of the club's owner, who was doing hard time in Federal prison for racketeering, mail fraud, extortion, and income tax evasion. Lois wondered how his son and daughter had dodged prosecution and how the club was able to stay open. But at the moment she didn't care. The Mountaintops had rocked the house the night before. They'd been as good as they'd ever been.

Now Johnny was threatening to cancel their contract and withhold payment for the balance of their engagement, and all because Christie couldn't hold her liquor and her drugs.

She put her hand on the door and finally heard two other voices in the room clearly. It sounded like Toni and Ramona were both in there, trying to divide Johnny's wrath and prevent him from firing the band.

Lois hesitated, then pushed through the door. She had a legitimate reason for being there, and she was afraid that Ramona was near the end of her patience. And if Ramona lost her temper at their employer, it wouldn't help the band get paid.

Johnny broke off his invective in mid-syllable. "What do you want?" he snarled.

Lois didn't blink. "The manager of the Styles Club in Gotham wants to talk to Ramona."

"She ain't finished here yet!"

Lois shrugged. "I just thought if you're going to fire us, she could tell the guy we could come in a couple of weeks sooner. He's trying to negotiate for a longer booking anyway and I don't have the authority to tell him yes or no. Ramona's the band's business manager, so she's got to make that decision."

Johnny's eyes narrowed, then he growled low and waved his hand in dismissal. Ramona turned and stalked stiff-legged out of the office. In a low voice, Lois said to her, "Lucy's talking to him on the phone in the dressing room common area."

Ramona nodded shortly. "Thanks."

Lois caught her gaze and looked close. Ramona nodded again and took a deep breath, then closed the door behind her.

Ramona would be okay, at least for one more day.

Johnny threw his unlit cigar down on the desk in front of him. "I don't care what any of you say! Christie fronts the band or you don't play!"

Lois crossed her arms and leaned against the wall, then glanced at Toni. Toni only rolled her eyes and turned away. "Mr. Taylor," Lois began, "if you had a meeting with your accounting firm and your head bookkeeper was sick and couldn't come,

would you cancel the meeting?"

"That ain't the same thing and you know it!" he roared.

He's pretty mean, thought Lois, but he's not in the same class as my stepfather on a weekend bender. "It's exactly the same thing, except if we hadn't taken the stage last night, you would have lost money and would never have been able to make up the difference."

Johnny blinked twice, as if he'd been surprised by an original thought. Then he shook his head again and repeated himself, but with less intensity. "The contract says that Christie Baldwin is the featured singer. I want her to sing."

Better, thought Lois. Maybe he can hear me if neither of us is yelling. "If you were a baseball manager and your all-star catcher had the flu, you'd send in a sub. You'd have to, or you'd forfeit the game." She lowered her arms to her sides and took a slow step towards him. "You don't want to forfeit the game, do you, Mr. Taylor?"

She held his gaze for a long moment, then he flopped down in his overstuffed chair. "Fine! Just don't leave Christie out of the mix. If she's okay, she sings."

Lois nodded. "We don't mind that, Mr. Taylor. We all know that Christie's a wonderful singer when she's not sick. All the men in the club think so, too."

Johnny picked up the bent cigar he'd thrown down and lit it. "As long as that's all they think about, that's okay by me." He puffed it into life. "You girls got rehearsal today?"

"Two hours from now."

He looked at the clock. "One-thirty?" Lois nodded. "Christie will be there. Make sure she okays the set list."

"We always do, Mr. Taylor."

"Good." He took a deep drag. "And, uh, tell, uh, tell the other girl who was in here —"

"Ramona Wilcox."

"Yeah. Tell her everything's dandy now. Everybody says you gals did a great job last night."

Lois smiled slightly. "Thank you."

He waved the cigar in her direction. "Just don't do it again, okay?"

"We won't, as long as Christie stays — healthy."

Johnny cocked one eyebrow. Good, thought Lois, he understands what I mean without having to admit he understands me. He saves face, we keep the job.

Johnny waved the cigar again and leaned back in the chair. "Okay, girlie, get back to making great music for us."

"Will do, Mr. Taylor."

She turned and stepped through the door, but Toni called to her. "Lois? Wait for me, will you? I need to chat with you for a minute or two."

"Sure thing, Ms. Taylor."

Lois closed the door but didn't walk away. She stood away from the frosted glass in the door and listened.

Toni said something that Lois didn't catch. "Come on," Johnny said, "you can't do that."

Something else inaudible from Toni. "Cut it out, Toni! We got a board meeting day after tomorrow. We'll talk about it then."

"No we won't!" Toni sounded mad. "We never talk about it! We've got to make changes in the way we do business! You can't be —" Lois couldn't hear the rest.

"I'm doin' things like Pop would do them!" Johnny's voice sounded angry again.

"And Pop's rotting in jail! We can't —"

"Enough!" he roared. "Go talk to — to what's-her-name, the brunette out there! And don't bring this up again!"

Lois quickly moved several feet down the hallway and leaned against the wall. Toni lurched through the door and almost slammed it shut, but controlled herself at the last moment.

"You wanted to see me?"

“Yeah, Lois.” Toni stepped closer. “But first, I have to ask you — what did you hear?”

“When?”

“Just now.”

“I heard you come out of your brother’s office.”

Toni squinted in apparent suspicion. “That’s all you heard?”

“I play rock-and-roll music in clubs all up and down the East Coast,” she deadpanned. “All those loud amplifiers in my ears must have dulled my hearing.”

“Uh-huh.” Toni gestured for Lois to walk with her. “That soft version of ‘Me And Bobby McGee’ last night was inspired. Was that Christie’s arrangement?”

“Christie likes to pretend she’s Janis Joplin when she sings that song. I’d rather be more like Judy Garland or Julie London.”

Toni smiled. “Whatever. It worked great.”

“Thanks.”

“No. Thank you for coming in when you did. I don’t think Ramona could have lasted much longer with Johnny.”

“It wasn’t just an excuse. There really is a call for her from the Styles Club in Gotham City.”

“I see. You girls still set on moving on?”

Lois smiled thinly. “Can’t get a deal with a record company without getting lots of exposure. We all knew that coming in, and we’re all committed to the same cause.”

Toni nodded again. “You gals were tight last night. I don’t think anyone missed a note in the whole set.”

Lois smiled for real. “It felt great to us, too. We don’t have to have Christie on stage with us to be good.”

“So you’re not going to lure her away from the club when you leave?”

“And deprive Johnny of the love of his life? No chance of that!”

“True romance will win out in the end.”

They shared a laugh, then Toni said, “Listen, there’s a guy who’s probably going to be in the audience tomorrow night who might be able to help you with the money end of that record deal. He’s looking to expand into the entertainment industry, and if he likes what he sees and hears he just might not be averse to helping you climb that particular mountaintop.”

“Oh, very punny, Toni. What’s his name?”

She shook her head. “Uh-uh, no names, not yet. He wants you to play to the whole room, not just to him. Besides, he might not make it.”

“He’s not one of those ‘take my money and drop your pants’ kind of guys, is he?”

“No. He’s legit.” At Lois’s skeptical look, Toni amended, “Well, he’s legit as in he has deep pockets and he wants to get into the record business. Anything else is your call.”

Lois nodded. “Okay. Look, we’re having a band meeting, kind of a working lunch, so I need to get back and find out what Styles wants and what we can do for them.”

“Okay. As long as you finish out this gig first.”

Lois sketched a salute as she walked away. “Christie and Johnny permitting, no problem.”

Clark checked his beard once more and nodded to himself, satisfied that it looked as real as he could get it. He’d never gotten the hang of using his vision gift to shape a beard, so he kept himself clean-shaven. All it required was a spray of air freshener to dispel the aroma of singed hair each morning and he was good to go.

He glanced at his watch and sighed. Fifteen minutes to ten, or fifteen minutes to wait for his appointment with ‘Pit Bull’ King — or, as she insisted, ‘Lucky Linda’ — to knock on his door. Linda had insisted on coming by to meet with him here at his pretend apartment to compare notes. He didn’t want to, but he had to admit that she’d been right when she’d pointed out that

being seen together in public wasn’t good for their health, and since her place was nearly six miles further away from the Metro Club than his hole in the wall was, he’d given in.

He sighed again. Maybe Perry could team her up with someone else after this story was filed. There were only so many ways for him to tell her ‘no’ without being rude, and he was certain he’d used all of them at least twice. Maybe he could play up to one of the women at the club to discourage her.

Or maybe that would make Linda mad enough to make a mistake, one which might endanger her. Or a mistake which would force Clark to choose between keeping his anonymous role as the Silent Vigilante or allowing someone to be hurt. Upon reflection, he decided that baiting Linda was a bad idea.

At least until after the story was printed.

A jaunty knock sounded from his door. He knew who it was without having to look.

He opened the door. “Come on in, Linda.”

She sauntered in like a two-dollar hooker and gave the cheap motel room a cursory glance. “Nice place ya got here, Cholly.”

He wasn’t in the mood to play the game with her. “Not today, Linda. I have to start hauling cases of liquor from the delivery truck to the storage room and I already have a crick in my back. And since this is Saturday, it’s going to be a busy day.”

She flipped characters in an instant and became a sexy vamp. “Oh, you poor boy! Do you want me to give you a back rub? I bet I could get those kinks out.”

He ignored her double entendre and shook his head. “No, I already took some medication. Can we just get on with it?”

Linda smiled as if she hadn’t just been shot down again. “No problem. I e-mailed my notes to you at the Planet already, but I’ll give you the Reader’s Digest version.”

“Go ahead.” He sat on the chair and motioned to the couch beside him.

“Thanks, Clark. I’ve already found out that Johnny Taylor’s girlfriend is a lush who also likes the nose candy a lot more than she should.”

His eyebrows pinched in confusion. “Nose candy?”

She mimed inhaling a line of powder. “The girl snorts cocaine, a lot of it. Up until about two months ago she seemed to have it under control, but I guess the free samples from Johnny’s endless supply got to her.”

“So the Metro gang is wholesaling cocaine, too?”

“I think so, but I don’t have hard proof yet. One of the other waitresses told me about Christie. She’s a fair ballad singer who can belt it out pretty good if she’s clean and sober, but the other girls think she’s headed for a crash.”

“How soon?”

Linda smiled. “They asked me if I wanted in on the pot riding on the day when Christie burns out and Johnny tosses her out the door.”

Clark nodded. “What’s the action?”

She barked out a sudden laugh. “Clark! You’d bet on something like that? You won’t even get in on the newsroom baseball pool!”

He shrugged. “I may need some extra money. Besides, I have to blend in.”

“Yeah, that’s true. But I don’t know if the bartenders are in the pool. You’ll have to talk to one of the other guys over there.”

“I’ll do that. Have you heard anything about money laundering or numbers rackets?”

“Not yet, but there’s an executive meeting tomorrow morning before the club opens. I’ll try to get in and hear what I can.”

He fixed her with a pointed glare. “Be careful. You heard what Perry told us. Don’t take dumb chances.”

“I won’t, I promise! Hey, how is that story on the Vigilante going?”

He grimaced. “Nothing new. And Perry is going to start

breathing down my neck about it as soon as this assignment's over."

She reached out and patted him on the knee. She left her hand there longer than he would have preferred. "Don't fret about it, Clark. You'll get it. You're almost as tenacious as I am."

"Let's focus on one story at a time." He sat back and blew out a long breath. "I haven't learned anything about the club yet, except that they don't make sure their 'guests' are old enough to drink."

"Private clubs make their own rules. There's nothing illegal about that."

He stood. "I don't want to see any more teenagers ending up dead or crippled in alcohol-related car wrecks. If the Metro Club is feeding that addiction too, I intend to see that it stops." He stepped towards the door. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to eat before I go in to work."

She opened her mouth but Clark stopped her with a frown and an upraised hand. "No. We can't have breakfast or lunch together. You and I aren't supposed to fraternize, either at work or outside it."

For the first time, she let her irritation show. "The other girls don't pay attention to those rules! Why should I?"

He gently shoved her towards the door and opened it. "Because we're new employees and I don't want to have this assignment terminated prematurely because my partner can't keep her hands to herself, that's why."

She snapped her head around to face him. "Can't keep — you think a lot of yourself, don't you, Kent?"

He hadn't set out to irritate her, but he decided to keep the flow going. Maybe it would discourage her. "I think a lot of my job. And I don't engage in office romances."

She glared at him for a long moment, then stormed out of the room. Now I can get some peace, thought Clark.

And Perry will run for Mayor of Metropolis, he mocked himself. Just as likely.

Toni Taylor smiled as the Mountaintops filed past her. "Great show, girls! Shamika, you rock!"

"Always do, Toni. But thanks."

"Lois, that was some inspired bass work. Keep it up! Oh, Connie, you were great! Every note just jumped off your guitar."

Connie smiled back. "It's easy to sound good when you work with a great band."

"That's the truth! Lucy, everything you did tonight was just wonderful! I loved those snaky dual guitar lines with Connie."

Lucy nodded. "Thanks. Connie's idea, but we came up with the lines together."

"Hey, after tonight I'd believe that you girls can do just about anything!"

Christie stopped in front of Toni and batted bleary eyes at her. "And I suppose I sounded like a herd of squalling cats?"

Toni forced herself to look surprised. "You, Christie? I've never heard you sound better, either with the others or by yourself."

Mollified, Christie smirked at Toni and meandered in the direction of Johnny's office as Ramona stopped and leaned her head close. "You're laying it on thick tonight, aren't you?"

Toni lifted one eyebrow in mock consternation. "Am I? I don't mean to. I just want you all to know that management knows how good you all are and how much you're appreciated." "Uh-huh."

Toni put one hand on Ramona's near elbow. "Really. I watch the nightly receipts more closely than my brother does. I know how much traffic you girls are pulling into the club every night. On Thursday, on the band's day off, it's easy to see what a difference it makes when you're not playing."

"Don't you think they're coming to hear Christie?"

Toni waved her hand. "At first they were, yes, but the word is out on you now." She mimed opening a newspaper. "The woman-about-town columnist in the Daily Treat writes, 'The Metro Club is hosting the Mountaintops for two more weeks. Go hear them while you can, because the next time we have a chance to listen to them live it will probably cost a lot more.' And that's practically a word-for-word quote."

Ramona chuckled. "Okay, you've convinced me. We're good."

"You know you are."

"And Christie sounded really good tonight, too. I just hope she stays straight enough for a repeat performance tomorrow night. That money guy you told Lois about better not have a tin ear."

Toni smiled. "Don't worry. He's practically writing the check already."

The five members of the Mountaintops had already changed, eaten dinner, and gone to their hotel for the night. Christie had accompanied Johnny to his apartment for a nightcap. And Toni was making the first of a series of moves intended to ease her into Johnny's spot as leader of the Metro Gang.

She opened the door to her office and gestured for her visitor to precede her. "You were correct, my dear," he purred. "The band is top-notch. They are musically excellent and quite attractive, if a bit raw and untutored in a visual sense. But I believe they can be molded into hit makers."

The door clicked shut behind her. "I told you they were good, Lex. And they can do rock, country, pop, jazz, or a cappella equally well."

Luthor smiled. "I believe you. However, I think I would prefer to reserve judgment on them for the moment. I would like to listen to them again tomorrow night."

"Of course."

"But I do have one request."

Toni's eyebrows drew down. "For me or for them?"

"For the ladies in the band, of course."

Toni relaxed. "What is it?"

"You said that the lead singer — Christie — was not a part of the group?"

"No, she's not. We originally hired them to back her up, but they're better as a band than as session players. I think they sound better without Christie."

Luthor pulled out a cigar and lit it. Toni noted that it smelled several levels better than Johnny's favored brand. "You wouldn't have any feminist goals in mind, now, would you, my dear?"

She hid her response to his repeated and grating 'my dear' and smiled. "I'm pushing them because they're good. They can be big nationally, maybe even internationally. And they understand what the dangers and pitfalls are. They're willing to pay the price for fame."

"I see. At any rate, my request is that they perform two songs of their own choosing tomorrow night without Christie, preferably cover tunes, not original songs. I want to make certain that they are as good without your brother's girlfriend as they are with her."

She nodded. "Fair enough. I'll pass that on to them. Anything else?"

He gave her a cobra smile. "Not at the moment. I will, of course, present you with a finder's fee should they succeed as you expect them to."

"Of course. Until tomorrow night, then?"

He lifted her hand and kissed it gently. "Until then. Goodnight, my dear."

She escorted him to the rear exit without a word, then watched as he climbed into a waiting black limo which glided quietly away. Once he was out of sight, Toni relaxed and hoped

that the next joint venture she started up with Lex Luthor — the mysterious new ‘boss’ of Metropolis — was as profitable as this one was certain to be. All she had to do was not let Luthor know that she knew who he really was, just keep pretending that she thought he was the successful businessman everyone else thought he was. And since no one else in the Metro Gang knew who he really was, there was no way anyone could betray her to him.

Or betray her to her brother.

>>>> Oh, The Games People Play

Toni Taylor moved slowly to the chair at the far end of the table from her brother. She didn’t think he’d already heard the reports the board members were about to share, but she had, and she didn’t want to be anywhere close to him. Johnny still tended to take out his anger and frustration on the objects and people in close proximity to him, and the swelling on her cheek from the last disagreement with her brother had finally gone down. She didn’t need any dental work done, and she didn’t want Johnny to change that.

Johnny slapped the table with his palm. “Awright, this meeting of the Metro Gang is now called to order. What we got?”

No one spoke. “C’mon, guys, we gotta know what’s what. Tommy, tell us about the new coke pipeline.”

Tommy shrugged. “Ain’t nothin’ to tell, Johnny.”

Johnny frowned. “Gotta be somethin’. How much we get shipped in last two weeks?”

Tommy shifted in his chair. “Nothin’. It got shut down soon as we started up.”

Johnny took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “What happened to it?”

“We — we ain’t sure, Johnny.”

“Then tell me what you are sure of.”

Tommy fidgeted some more, then leaned his elbows on the table. “We think maybe that Wanda Detroit dame tipped off the Feds, cause the cops we bought didn’t do nothin’ and ain’t tellin’ us nothin’ either. They’re acting like they don’t know what happened. But the Feds picked up the whole shipment, took the speedboats, and busted both crews.”

Johnny shook his head. “How long till we get another delivery?”

“Well — we ain’t.” Tommy waited for Johnny to speak, then continued when Johnny remained silent. “My Columbian contact says he can’t trust us. They’re gonna do business with somebody else.”

“Somebody else here in the city?”

“Uh — yeah. Leastwise that’s what he told me.”

Johnny took out a cigar and sniffed it without lighting it. “We know who that someone else is?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it.”

“Keep at it! I wanna know who’s hornin’ in on our business!”

The cigar crumbled in Johnny’s grip and he dropped the pieces into a large ceramic ashtray. “Let’s keep going. Angelo, how’s the numbers doin’ this week?”

Angelo spread his hands apologetically. “Collections are down so far this month, Johnny.”

Johnny frowned. “How far down?”

“Over last month? About two percent.”

“That all? That ain’t bad.”

“Maybe not, but they’re down almost nineteen percent from a year ago.”

“Nineteen percent!” Johnny stood and shoved one hand into his pants pocket and gestured with the other as he paced. “What’s the deal, people? Numbers collection is down! Our girls are gettin’ arrested left and right! Coke distribution is down and we can’t find new dealers or suppliers! Will somebody please tell me why that is?”

Toni leaned back in her chair. “One reason is that there’s a

new ‘boss’ in Metropolis.”

Johnny leaned over the table and snarled, “So what? We survived competition before! I remember in Pop’s day that he —”

“Pop is in jail, Johnny.”

“I know that! And my little kid sister don’t gotta remind me about it every single day!”

“I do if we keep on —” she broke off as the door opened. The new blond waitress — the girl’s name escaped Toni’s memory for the moment — walked in carrying a tray of drinks.

No danger there. “As I was saying, I have to remind everyone what happened to Pop can happen to us if we keep on doing business the old way. It doesn’t work any more. We have to modernize if we want to stay in business.”

Johnny leaped to his feet and lifted a fist. Toni thought he would have struck her had she been close enough. “Modernize!” he roared. “Pop’s way was good enough! He sent you to that high-class Ivy League school so’s you could be a better secretary! That’s all you’ll ever be anyway!”

The girl with the tray put a glass down beside Johnny and softly moved on. Toni was sure he didn’t even see her. “I’m not a secretary, Johnny. I have a Masters of Business Administration and I’m a certified insurance underwriter. I’m also a licensed stockbroker and certified financial planner.”

“So go start your own insurance company! As long as I’m in charge here, we do things my way!”

One of the other men at the table slipped the waitress a folded bill as he took his drink. She silently smiled her thanks. The man sipped his drink and softly said, “I think we should at least listen to Toni’s ideas, Johnny. We don’t have to take her advice if we don’t want to.”

Johnny leaned his hands on the table and glared at the man. “Really? You want to take her advice, Benny?”

Benny shrugged and looked at the table. “I don’t know, since I haven’t heard it yet.”

Johnny looked at the other men at the table in turn. “How about the rest o’ you mooks? You wanna listen to my little sister’s advice too?”

They murmured and shifted nervously in their chairs and broke eye contact with him, but without actually coming out and saying it, Toni knew they were willing to listen to her. Whether it was Johnny’s abrasive manner, her qualifications, her gender, or the current business climate, she didn’t care. She had their attention for the moment.

Now all she had to do was to give them better ways to do business. She waited for Johnny to nod and sit down. “First of all, we need to achieve a lower profile. We’re too public right now. Too many people know who most of you are, and they also know what you really do for a living. That’s got to change.”

Benny nodded. “I see the wisdom in that, Toni, but what do you suggest that we do?”

“The same kind of thing Frank Lucas did in Harlem back in the late seventies and early eighties. He diverted public opinion to his side by providing his customers free food, basic medical care, child care, and educational help for their kids. It didn’t matter that he was robbing them blind by selling them heroin as long as he set up soup kitchens and free clinics for them. For the most part, they refused to cooperate with the police in any investigation into Lucas.”

Benny frowned in thought. “I think that might be a good basic suggestion, Toni. What do you think, Louis?”

Across the table, Louis shook his head. “Isn’t Lucas in Federal prison now?”

Toni nodded. “Yes, but not for narcotics. It was for the killings he ordered. He let the power and the money go to his head and he started acting like a dictator.” She looked pointedly in her brother’s direction. “That’s one of the things that has to stop right now.”

Johnny stood abruptly. “Hey! If I wanna go out on the town with my lady, I have a right to do that! And if somebody gets fresh with her, then I got a right to work him over and teach him a lesson! What would you do different if you was running things?”

Toni started to speak, but Louis spoke up again. “Your quick anger is going to be your undoing one day, Johnny. I don’t know that Toni should be running the business, but she has some fresh ideas. And she has control of her temper, which at this point you do not.”

Johnny slammed the table with his hand again. “I’m runnin’ this gang!” He pulled a pearl-handled semiautomatic from under his coat, fired three rounds into the far wall, then pointed the muzzle at Toni’s head. “You take orders from me! Not the other way around!”

Toni heard everyone else in the room, including the blond with the drink tray, hit the floor between shots. The analytical part of her mind wondered briefly how much damage the bullets had done to the far wall and the storage room beyond. But the larger part, the part that knew how much violence a forty-five caliber ACP round could do to human flesh at a range of ten feet, was screaming at her to dive behind something very solid where Johnny couldn’t shoot her.

But she didn’t dare move from her chair, even assuming she could find cover. She had to risk her brother’s mercurial wrath in order to gain respect from the men in the room. If she dove to the floor with the rest of the council members — which they were most eager to do — she’d lose whatever good will she’d built up with them. The moment wasn’t just about her survival, it was about her image with the rest of the directors and her influence with them.

She forced her voice to remain low and level. “Shooting me won’t make the truth go away, Johnny. This isn’t a power play and I’m not trying to take over or push you out of the way. I’m only trying to maximize profits and minimize risk for all of us.”

He held the pistol in place for four agonizingly long seconds, then lowered the hammer and returned the weapon to his shoulder holster. “Awright. We’ll listen. But we ain’t gonna do nothin’ just ‘cause you say we oughta do it.”

She nodded and tried to disguise her immense relief. “Fair enough. Shall I present my thoughts now, or should I prepare a detailed document for next time?”

He waved one hand dismissively. “Why don’t you hit the high points now and give us that — that detailed document next time?” He looked around at the rest of the men. “Hey, fellas, you can come out now. Play time’s over.”

Toni looked around as the men slowly regained their seats. Then she glanced over her shoulder at the pale blond still kneeling by the door.

She wasn’t sure, maybe it was just a spilled drink, but it almost looked as if the girl had wet her pants.

Toni sighed in relief as she realized she hadn’t quite done the same thing.

She realized that Johnny had asked her something. “I’m sorry, big brother, what did you say?”

He gave her a ‘stupid-sister’ glare and said, “I asked you if you found out anything about this Wanda Detroit dame yet.”

“Oh.” Toni took a moment to collect her thoughts, then answered. “She has contacts with three or four honest newspapers on the East Coast. One of them is the Miami Herald-Tribune, one is the Gotham Daily News, and one is the Daily Planet here in Metropolis. There are a couple of others I haven’t verified yet.”

“You got any names, who her contacts are?”

“We still don’t know who Wanda really is, but I’m almost certain her Florida contact is a woman named Cordelia MacDougal. I have some leads on the Gotham contact, but I have no idea about the Metropolis contact. I don’t think Wanda has operated in Metropolis that often. I’m not even sure she’s here

now.” She took a breath, held it, then let it out. “But I think she is. If she stays consistent in her pattern of movements, she’s probably in the city now.”

Johnny paused in thought, then nodded. “Okay. We need to put out a contract on this Cordelia dame — assumin’ that’s okay with my little sister — and make sure we know who the Gotham contact is. When we do, we can just tell one of those Halloween-costume crooks over there and let them take care of it. Probably won’t cost us a dime, either. Some of those wackos would do it just for kicks.” He chuckled. “There’s at least one who’d think it was some kind of a joke instead of a job.”

Toni nodded. “As long as they can’t trace it back to us, Johnny, I don’t have a problem with it.”

He growled an approving laugh. “Now you’re gettin’ smart. Okay, tell us about your big ideas.”

Lois nodded to herself in time as she scribbled notes on the pad of paper in front of her. The small earpiece usually fed recorded music into her right ear, but the modified combination cassette player and FM radio could also pick up the low-power transmitter Lois had hidden in the conference room. At the moment, she was recording the meeting of the Metro Gang leadership in her own special shorthand. As far as the other girls in the band knew, she was working on a new arrangement of “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” for their a cappella mini-set later on that week.

None of them — not even Lucy — knew that she’d already finished it and was waiting a day to give it to the group at rehearsal. With all six women singing — assuming Christie could function rationally and would stay with the arrangement — they could really make that song sound rich and full.

But at the moment, Wanda Detroit was putting together another expose on organized crime in Metropolis, using Lois’ arrangement as camouflage. With any luck, she could polish this piece and send it to her contact in Gotham City for distribution among the few news organizations she could trust.

But Lois’ time was running out. The last time she’d spoken to her contact in Gotham, Vicky had said that some very unsavory characters had been snooping around her home and her business. Even with that weird Bat-whatever playing smack-the-bad-guy over Gotham’s rooftops at night, the Vicky Vale connection was about to dry up. And Lois would never knowingly put Vicky in danger. She’d have to warn Vicky that Toni might be on her trail. And she’d also have to warn Cordelia that the bad guys were onto her, that she’d have to disappear from Miami for a while. The Metro Gang played for keeps.

But this story was too hot to sit on. If she could get it out quickly enough, she might be able to save some lives this time instead of just revealing who the killers had been. Johnny Taylor was a constant danger to society and especially to civilians. He didn’t care who he hurt when he started shooting, as long as he hit the original target. The phrase “collateral damage” didn’t exist in his vocabulary. For all Lois knew, he might have shot someone in the meeting just now.

On the other hand, Toni was actually more dangerous than her brother, because she was willing to move the gang’s criminal activities into the present day and act more like a corporation than a Chicago mobster. Her criminal model wasn’t Al Capone, it was Lucky Luciano, the Mafia don who’d ruled organized crime in America for nearly thirty years. She wouldn’t order a murder out of anger or revenge. It was just business for her.

And Lois didn’t want any other child to grow up without a father. One Lucy Lane was one too many.

She only hoped that she could hang on long enough to make a real dent in the criminal organizations she’d gotten close to. If Toni had found Cordelia and was closing in on Vicky, it was only a matter of time before she found Wanda’s real identity. And Lois

had no illusions about her friendship with Toni making a difference when the survival of Toni's way of life was at stake. Lois would be found lying dead in a field or an alley or maybe Hobbs Bay, and the Mountaintops would once again have to find themselves a new bass player.

Her last thought almost made her laugh. If concern for the band was uppermost on her mind, then maybe Wanda should disappear for a few months and let the trail cool off. The strain of living with a secret identity was starting to wear on her, and the stress would soon show in her music.

And she couldn't let that happen. She and Lucy were still committed to making the big time. It was too important a dream to both of them to just let it go.

There was no way she'd let her sister down. Not now, not ever.

Her attention was diverted as a waitress, the new girl Toni had just hired, all but sprinted out of the hallway to the meeting room. She ran in an odd, hunched-over position as if she were hurt. Odd, thought Lois, she looks familiar —

And suddenly Lois realized who it was. The new girl was Linda King.

She'd known Linda slightly in college and hadn't trusted her then, and nothing in the intervening years had happened to change that. Why was she here? Was she working undercover as a reporter or had she gone completely over to the dark side? And — most importantly — would Linda recognize Lois and tell someone that they'd clashed in college over Linda's lack of ethics? Would she mention to someone that the band's bass player had been a reporter on her school newspaper for a year and had specialized in honesty and strict ethics?

Linda disappeared into the locker room without looking around, and Lois realized why she'd been moving with such an odd gait as she spotted the dampness on her uniform shorts. She must have been in the conference room during Johnny's shooting session and had lost her bladder control.

It would have been funny had the other woman's presence not made Lois' situation that much more perilous.

Lois mentally tallied the changes in herself in the years since she'd last seen Linda. Lois was thinner through the middle but broader in the shoulders — from years of hauling musical equipment around — and her hair, which had been long and dark and parted in the middle in college, was now much shorter and lighter with reddish highlights. And Linda hadn't been part of the club and party scene where Lois had played and sung. Not only that, Linda had always paid far more attention to men in general than to the women around her.

Lois sighed. There was little she could do to reduce the risk except to stay away from Linda as much as possible. Just another headache to deal with

Linda threw her wet clothes into a plastic bag and flushed red again. She'd been in danger before! She'd even been shot at once! She understood that personal danger came with the undercover role she'd volunteered for. So why had she lost control of herself today?

She knew why. She'd lost it because Johnny Taylor was a complete psycho with a pistol in his hand, a killer who didn't care who he shot. One of those bullets had showered dust on her hair just as she was dropping to the floor, and she knew that if she'd hesitated half a second longer, her brains might have been splattered all over that wall.

The thought made her shudder and sob and her belly threatened to let go again. But she clenched her fists tightly and slowly forced herself to calm down and relax. She'd clean up, change into dry clothes, and act like nothing had happened. She'd do her undercover job as a waitress and also her real job as an undercover reporter. She wouldn't call attention to herself in

either role. And she'd make Clark proud of her.

She was just glad he hadn't come in yet. She didn't want to explain herself to him or listen to him tell her how dangerous this assignment was for her and that she should go back to the Planet and be safe. It was just as dangerous for him! Why couldn't he be the one to be careful? Why couldn't he see her for the woman she was, the one she desperately wanted people to see in her? Why couldn't he see how much she cared about him and how much he needed her?

She had to get the story. She had to take chances. She had to make Clark see how skilled and valuable she was as a partner — as his partner. And she had to let Perry know that she deserved the best possible raise on her upcoming annual review.

Maybe she'd even get a Kerth nomination out of this. The thought helped calm her as she pulled fresh tights on. She was just glad her one pair of spike heels hadn't gotten wet. Now it was time to go back to work.

She could do this. She had to.

>>>> String of Pearls

I'm bored, thought Connie. And I'm thirsty. I need to do something to entertain myself.

She glanced over at the bartenders preparing for the evening's business and nodded to herself. "Ramona? I'm thirsty. Let's go get something to drink."

"At the bar?"

"Unless they've put in a Burger Buster since last night, yes. Come on! I want to talk to that new guy."

Ramona rolled her eyes at her friend. "I guess you want me to run interference for you?"

"Naw, let's just check him out."

Ramona tapped Lois on the shoulder. "Hey, you thirsty? Connie and I are going to get something to drink before rehearsal."

Lois smiled and shook her head. "No thanks, I'm good. Besides, I have to finish these charts."

"Your loss. It should be fun. Connie wants to go tease the animals over there."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Why do you go along with her flirting? One of these days some guy's gonna take her seriously and she'll have to fight him off."

Connie leaned in to defend herself. "Honey, I've been fighting them off since I was thirteen. I think I know how to take care of myself by now."

Connie saw the glint in Lois' eye but didn't try to stop her. "Well, they should be slowing down a little, now that you're getting to be so much older. Or are you the one who's slowing down?"

Connie didn't expect a comeback that good. She did a double-take and lifted her index finger towards Lois' face, but Ramona intercepted her and turned her around. "Come on, let's go wet our whistles. You two can compare birth certificates later."

Over Ramona's shoulder, Connie added, "Yeah, and I'll pull out my four beauty contest crowns too!"

"Did they make them out of rocks or dinosaur bones way back then?"

Ramona grabbed Connie's shoulders and turned her away from Lois again. "Come on, I'm thirsty! You can kill her later!"

Lois called out, "Don't keep her up too late, Ramona, the old lady needs her nap."

"You're in deep trouble now, kid!" Connie called out. "Remember the reptile wars?"

"I remember that you quit after the live two-headed frog."

Ramona shoved Connie across the room. "Please don't start that again! I thought we'd never get rid of the dead snake smell in the bus."

Connie's shoulders shook with laughter. "You know, I never get tired of dueling with Lois. She's not at all like Jennifer was. If I even tried to joke with Jen she'd either get all bent out of shape or start crying."

Ramona grinned thinly as they crossed the club floor to the bar. "I know. I finally retired my referee's whistle a few months ago. I'm glad you two can joke about anything."

"Almost anything. I know my limits and I don't want to eat her fist." Connie slapped the bar as the new bartender entered from the back room carrying a rack of clean shot glasses. "Hey, cutie, how about some drinks for the ladies?"

He began putting the glasses away under the bar. "Name's not 'cutie.' What can I get for you ladies? Or are you here just to bother me?"

Ramona tapped Connie on the shoulder. "Ooh, watch out for this one, girlfriend. I don't think he's intimidated by your womanly charms."

The big man leaned on his hands and glared at each of them in turn. "Should I be intimidated?"

Both women took in his broad shoulders, his firm neck, his tapered waist, his well-filled shirtsleeves, and his easy balance. Connie recovered her voice first. "Uh, no, Stud, you got nothin' to worry about from us."

His eyes narrowed. "Name's not 'Stud' either."

Ramona lifted a hand. "Hold on. Let's start over, okay? We're with the Mountaintops, you know, the band? I'm Ramona Wilcox, business manager and keyboardist, and this is Connie Vandross, the best woman guitarist on the east coast and self-proclaimed gift to men everywhere."

The big man's face relaxed slightly. "Vandross, eh? Any relation to Luther?"

"No such luck," answered Connie. "Hey, since you don't answer to 'Cutie' or 'Stud,' what should we call you?"

"Folks around here call me Charlie King, so maybe you should try using that handle. I just started here a couple days ago."

"How do you like it so far?"

"You're Connie, right?" She grinned and nodded. He shrugged. "It's about like I expected. Except your band is probably the best I've ever heard in a club this size."

Connie leaned closer and lowered her voice seductively. "You have much experience with musicians in clubs, Charlie?"

"I don't play an instrument or sing, if that's what you're asking me."

"What do you play, Charlie?" purred Connie.

"I'm really good with an FM radio or a CD player. Oh, and I set up and ran the sound system for a student jazz band my freshman year of college. It was one of my favorite things to do that year, and the musicians all liked the way I handled the board." Ramona's attention focused on him. "You went to college?"

"Football scholarship. Dropped out after my sophomore season to see the world." He snorted. "Ended up seeing more of the inside of the ship's hold than the world."

Connie leaned on the bar invitingly. "You haven't told me about your — experiences, Charlie."

Ramona shoved her friend good-naturedly. "Will you leave the young man alone, Connie? He's new! Give him a chance to get his feet under him before you hit him full force like that!"

"Okay, okay! Hey, Charlie, I never got my drink."

"You never told me what it was you wanted."

"Oh, right." Connie grinned at him again. "Ginger ale and ice, in a tall glass."

Charlie lifted a puzzled eyebrow. "Just ginger ale? Nothing else?"

"Nope," Connie replied. "Can't afford to get drunk. I might fall off the top of the mountain."

He gave her back a sideways grin and poured a tall glass of ginger ale and ice, complete with a slice of lime on the edge. "Here you go."

"Thanks, Charlie. Oh, if Christie comes over — you know Christie, right?"

"Five-three, about a hundred and fifteen pounds, shoulder-length curly blond hair, nice singing voice, sharp tongue, vacant eyes, drinks like a fish? That Christie?"

Ramona blinked, then grinned. "That's her in a nutshell. Anyway, we're trying to make sure she doesn't aggravate her sensitive throat with alcohol, so —"

"Ms. Taylor already told me not to give her any booze," Clark interrupted. "Except she said it was a sensitive gall bladder."

Connie snorted a laugh into her ginger ale and glanced around apologetically. "Sorry. Bubbles went up my nose."

He leaned closer. "Don't worry, ladies. Unless Johnny Taylor himself gets it for her, Christie isn't getting lit up on my watch."

Ramona smiled. "Can't ask for much more than that. Thanks."

"You're welcome. How about you? You want something too?"

"Hmm. How about a strawberry smoothie?"

"With or without bananas?"

"Without, thanks."

"Anything special added in?"

"No, just the strawberries."

Clark smiled. "One strawberry smoothie coming right up."

He turned away to make the treat. Connie waited until he started grinding the ice and fruit together, then leaned close to Ramona and whispered, "I hope he hangs around for a while. This one's nice."

"Yeah. Almost too nice to be true."

"Probably gay," sighed Connie.

"Yeah, probably," Ramona whispered back.

"Too bad," cooed Connie. Then she sighed dramatically.

"What are you planning now, oh evil one?"

"Me? Nothing! I was just thinking about all those men stuck on a ship for months without a woman in sight." She sighed again. "It's just a huge missed opportunity."

"You poor thing."

"Actually," Connie replied suavely, "I was thinking about poor deprived Lucy."

Ramona snorted a suppressed laugh as Charlie returned. He frowned for a moment, then his face cleared as Connie gave him her best innocent smile. "Here you go, Ramona, one strawberry smoothie, complete with one oversized straw. Anything else, ladies?" "Not at the moment," answered Ramona. "Thanks for the drinks."

"You're welcome. Oh, and just so you know, Ms. Taylor already let me know about the rules."

Puzzled, Connie blinked at him. "What rules are those?"

"That the help, namely me, ain't allowed to fraternize with the band except for work stuff."

"Oh, right. Those rules." Like he'd need them, thought Connie, unless the club had N*Sync or The Backstreet Boys booked after they left.

Ramona nodded. "Those rules bother you, Charlie?"

He leaned his hands on the bar and exhaled sharply. All the good humor left his face for a moment. "I'm a healthy young man who's been at sea between here and various points in Africa and Asia for almost seven months on a tramp freighter where the only thing female was the second mate's pet monkey and I got zero shore leave. How do you think I feel about 'em?"

The intensity of his reply startled both women. Ramona got control of her mouth first and said, "I guess you don't much like them."

“Give the lady a kewpie doll.” He hauled himself erect and glowered at them. “Now, if you’re through teasing the animals, I need to get back to work.”

He turned away as if dismissing them. As the women walked across the club floor to the stage, Ramona leaned towards Connie and whispered, “I’m pretty sure he’s not gay.”

Connie stared at her ginger ale and tried not to burst out laughing. “Ya think?”

Lois looked up from the sheet music in her hand and saw the wide-eyed faces of her bandmates and the suppressed laughter behind both Ramona’s and Connie’s lips. “Now what’s the matter with you two?”

Connie ducked her head and scooted backstage. Ramona paused long enough to take a pull from her smoothie, then she muttered, “The new bartender isn’t gay.”

Before Lois could respond to the apparent non sequitur, Ramona quickly strode past her and joined Connie backstage in near-hysterical but muted laughter. The only words Lois could make out were “monkey” and “seven months,” and none of it made a bit of sense to her.

Confused, she looked across the room to the new bartender, who — according to Ramona — wasn’t gay. Big deal, she thought. He’s a sailor. He probably has girlfriends all over the world, one in every port, just like the songs say.

He looks pretty good from here, though, she thought idly. Lucky girlfriends.

Enough of that. They had a potential backer to impress during tonight’s show, and one of them still had to convince Christie to sit out on the two songs they wanted to use to showcase the band’s vocal sound. Maybe they could appeal to Christie’s vanity and tell her that such a gesture would show that she was secure about her position and would make her look like she was a kind and helpful person. Who knew? She might even buy it. Or maybe she’d just let Toni suggest it. Maybe she could convince Christie to be a team player for one night.

Their original songs, which they couldn’t perform at the Metro Club due to the contract they’d signed, were mostly ready for the live performance test. All they had to do was figure out a way to shoehorn them into the shows at the Styles Club in Gotham without making the manager too angry. Lois thought that at least two of them needed some work, and she had to decide on the best approach for both Connie and Lucy so that her suggestions wouldn’t result in an argument. Songwriters sure are touchy, she mused.

And she still had to figure out how to mail her latest Wanda Detroit expose piece without risking her cover. After the board meeting earlier in the day, Johnny had increased security inside and outside the club, supposedly to keep the employees and the clientele safer. But Lois also suspected that he was afraid that whoever Wanda Detroit was, she had a pipeline into his operation, and he was trying to disrupt her communications.

So far Linda hadn’t said anything about knowing Lois, but that could change. And Lois didn’t know if Linda was using a false name or if she’d actually married some guy named Wannamaker. It didn’t sound like the kind of name an undercover operative would use. She didn’t even know if Linda actually was undercover or if she’d just needed a job.

No matter. She’d figure it out. She always did. And she didn’t have time to sit around and leer at the new bartender.

Even if he did look really good from the back, even from across the room, especially when he raised his arms and stretched out his shirt across the tightest shoulders Lois had ever seen outside a gym, and if those tight shoulders made a perfect ‘V’ shape down to his —

Enough! she snarled to herself. You have work to do!

Clark managed to keep the smile off his face as he watched Connie and Ramona skip past their apparently baffled bass player. ‘Teasing the animals,’ indeed. It was a funny moment in a tense assignment. And the featured singer for the band wasn’t making it any easier for the club staff. As hard as it was for the band to deal with Christie and her antics, it was doubly hard for the club’s employees to deal with Johnny trying to be supportive of her when it was clear that she was a liability to the legitimate business of the club.

In the three days he’d been on this assignment, Christie had missed a rehearsal and the second set of a performance, and she’d staggered on stage at the last moment twice. She couldn’t continue to function like that for long, but Clark knew that she’d never listen to a newly-hired bartender, not when she was the owner’s girlfriend.

Except that Johnny wasn’t the owner. His father, who was currently a long-term guest of the state of New Troy, still held the deed to the club. And he’d already seen a number of arguments start between Johnny and Toni. They’d always kept them low-key or taken them into a private office, but there was still plenty of obvious friction between them.

Maybe he could use that to his advantage, he mused. Maybe he had a sympathetic ear for Toni to pour her troubles into, not to mention any information on the rackets he was certain they were still running. It might make Linda mad — no, scratch that, it would definitely make Linda mad.

But that wasn’t important. What was important was getting the goods on the Metro gang, not making Linda feel good about herself or about her non-existent relationship with Clark. His focus was on getting the story.

Of course, while he was at it, he might slip a few glances at the band’s bass player. There was something about her, something sharply intelligent and intense and focused that drew him like a bee to pollen. He wanted to know more about her — where she’d gone to school, whether musical talent ran in her family as it seemed to, what kinds of foods she liked, what she read, what she listened to, and what did she do with her free time or did she work on her music as often as it seemed.

Like the papers she held in her hand.

Curious, he focused his special vision on those papers. The top page was hand-written sheet music, but the other four pages beneath it weren’t. The writing on them was some kind of shorthand he hadn’t seen before. And the fact that she’d managed to scribble that much down without him noticing was significant. There was far more to Lois Lane than met the eye.

And now he had a valid reason for getting to know her better.

Lucy picked up her guitar and checked her tuning as Christie leaned sloppily on the Fender Rhodes suitcase keyboard. The rest of the group was ready for rehearsal, but Christie had obviously managed to sneak vodka into her water bottle again. The woman was savoring it as if it were vintage champagne. Never mind that you could stick a rag in the neck of a vodka bottle, light it with a match, and use it as a fire grenade. Christie loved her vodka and didn’t care what a Molotov cocktail was unless one of the bartenders could mix it for her.

Lucy hated the booze and the drugs, hated what they were doing to Christie, hated how Christie’s intoxication was causing problems for the band. And Lucy hated it when anyone got in the way of the band’s success. Ever since her father had died in that supposed ‘lab accident’ and her mother had remarried, she’d hated booze and drugs. Lois kept telling her that it wasn’t Mom’s fault, that Ellen Lane — now Beauchamp — hadn’t intended to replace them with her addictions, but it had happened anyway.

And Randy Beauchamp hadn’t helped the situation. He’d zeroed in on Ellen as soon as the insurance had paid off on Sam’s death. It should have been enough money for Ellen to live

comfortably for years and more than enough for both girls to get solid college educations, but Randy the Dandy had siphoned off most of it into part-ownership of a casino in Atlantic City even before he'd pressured Ellen into marrying him. And the profit he'd garnered had gone into his private accounts, not towards his new family's welfare.

He'd tried to buy Lucy's affections, but she had never allowed herself to give the man a chance. She had felt guilty about it until she'd learned that Randy had tried to molest sixteen-year-old Lois, which had turned out to be a huge mistake. Lois had not only broken the man's nose and sprained his knee using her Tai-Kwan-Do skills, she'd let his 'partners' in the casino know what had happened. The men with bent noses and bulges under their coats had come to see Randy and had 'convinced' him of the error of his ways. They didn't want any accusations leveled against him that might cost him his gaming license — or their semi-legitimate front man — and from then on both Lois and Lucy had received allowances with no strings attached, along with their own apartment in Metropolis. Both girls earned their high school diplomas, complete with academic honors. Lois had attended two years of college and Lucy one, but they'd decided to try to make a living with their music.

For the most part it had worked. They'd built a strong reputation for themselves on the East coast college circuit, and then they'd scheduled a tour using some contacts their stepfather had reluctantly provided. When the third member of their act had gotten homesick and run home to his mommy in the middle of a show in Colorado, their tour had collapsed, but that same day they'd met Ramona and Connie and Shamika, who were desperate for a bass player. Lois had agreed to join them as long as Lucy could come too, and the three Mountaintops had had little choice but to agree, if very reluctantly.

But the five of them had come together as one. After a shaky start, their sound had blossomed and matured, and there was very little they couldn't do on stage together. Nearly two years on the road had molded them into a musical team which was also the family Lucy had desperately craved for so long but feared that she'd never know again.

Now Christie was threatening that musical and personal harmony. Her selfishness and greed and addiction were poisoning the group. The audience couldn't see it yet, couldn't feel it, but Lucy could. Christie was a threat to Lucy's family, just as Ellen Lane had been.

And for the same reasons: booze and drugs. Lucy didn't care that Christie was too insecure to go onstage without her liquid crutch and her magic powder. Lucy didn't care that Christie was afraid that the only reason she was singing in the club was because Johnny had set it up, that she wasn't really good enough to be a star on her own. And Lucy didn't care that Christie was terrified that her musical talent was nothing more than a mirage.

So what Lucy did next was totally understandable.

Christie tried to straighten up from the piano as Ramona sat down at the keyboard, but she had already gone past 'feeling good' and was rapidly approaching the 'puddle behind the microphone' stage. Lucy saw it, knew what was happening, and lost her temper.

She slammed her guitar down onto the stand, then stomped over to Christie and slapped the plastic bottle out of her hands. "Idiot!" she screamed. "You're killing yourself with this crap!"

"Hey!" yelled Christie. "Thass my water bottle."

Lucy poked her finger into Christie's shoulder. "That's full of vodka and you know it! We all know it! You're not fooling anyone, especially not Johnny Taylor!"

Christie's glazed eyes slowly sharpened. "Oh, yeah? You wanna replace me, don't you? You might want Johnny, but you can't handle Johnny! You're not woman enough!"

"You moron! I don't give a flying flip about Johnny! I care

about this band and these women and you're wrecking it for all of us!"

"Oh yeah?" Christie tried to shove Lucy away but only succeeded in falling to her knees. "Hey!" yelled Christie. "She push me down! She tryin' to beat me up!"

Lucy's control deserted her. She drew back her foot for a kick to Christie's face, but Shamika grabbed her from behind and easily lifted her away from the confrontation. Lucy pulled at the bigger woman's corded arms but couldn't break free. "Lemme go!" she shouted. "Let me go right now! I'm gonna knock some sense into her!"

Lois leaned in and barked, "Get hold of yourself, Luce! You can't fight her!"

"You wanna bet? She's got no chance against me!"

"That's what I mean, Luce! You can't fight her the way she is now! You could kill her!"

"I'll kick her face in! I'll rip her head off! Let me go!"

Shamika set Lucy down but didn't release her arms. "Settle down, jazz girl! You ain't helpin' nobody with this."

Lucy finally shook free and glared at Christie from across the stage. "If she comes on drunk tonight, she's gonna screw up the show! I'm tired of letting her drag us down! She better be straight tonight!"

Christie stumbled to her feet and leaned on Ramona. "Or what, you little snip? What're you gonna do about it?"

Lucy glared at Christie for a few seconds, then spun away and stomped offstage, but then she stopped and peeked through the backstage curtains to watch what might happen next.

Lois turned to Christie, who had somehow recovered her "water" bottle and was about to take another drink when Lois took the bottle away and secured the cap. "I'm going to put something with lots of caffeine in here, Christie," she said. "And you're not going to drink any more booze today. You have six hours to get sober or I'm going to Toni Taylor and we'll see just who's more important to the club, you or us."

Christie pushed her hair back with one unsteady hand. "You — you can't take my water! That's my — my special vitamin water! I need it! I really need it!"

Lois lifted Christie's chin with her hand and spoke with glacial certainty. "Ms. Baldwin, you have one chance to make good with us. You have to sing clean and sober tonight, and you have to follow all the arrangements. If you don't, I'm going to have Shamika hold you down while Lucy pounds on you." Lois pinched Christie's chin as her hand flipped away. "Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

Christie took a deep breath, then looked around at the other four women. Ramona seemed anxious, Connie was obviously mad, Shamika folded her arms and appeared bored, but Lois seemed to loom over her, determined and intense and more than a little bit scary. From behind the curtain, Lucy watched the reality of her situation wend its way through Christie's boozed-soaked brain. "Yeah," Christie finally answered. "I understand."

Lois nodded. "Good. I'm going to get Lucy calmed down so we can get through this rehearsal. Sham, will you go with Christie and make sure she doesn't get lost before rehearsal starts?"

Shamika's ebony face moved ever so slightly. "No problem," she rumbled. "I'll stay with her. Me and her gonna be close as two peas in a pod."

Lucy pulled the curtain shut and concealed her relief and glee. It was going to be all right after all.

>>>> They Can't Take That Away From Me

Lucy looked around the stage. "Is Shamika getting ready?"

Lois nodded. "She's doing her usual pre-gig ritual, running through all twenty-six snare rudiments on a practice pad in the dressing room. Christie's in there with her, too. They'll be ready

when the curtain goes up.”

Lucy exhaled and rotated her shoulders. “Sham’s always ready. I’ve known reliable drummers who couldn’t keep a beat if they were wired to a metronome and great drummers who couldn’t show up on time for their own funerals. But Shamika is the most reliable good drummer I’ve ever met. I wouldn’t trade her for anybody in the business.”

“I’ll tell her you said that.”

“Don’t you dare! If she finds out what I really think about her, I’ll never hear the end of it!”

Lois chuckled and peeked out from behind the curtain. “Good crowd tonight. Hope our money man is out there somewhere.”

Lucy snorted. “I just hope he can tell rhythm and blues from his elbow and shoes.”

Connie slid her head between the sisters. “Anyone see Malcolm out there anywhere?”

Lois snapped her head around. “What? Malcolm?” She peered out towards the soundboard and scanned the area. “No. Maybe he’s getting something to drink.”

“I hope so,” sighed Connie. “This is the most nerve-wracking gig I’ve ever had.”

Lucy nudged her. “Even more than the first night after Jennifer left and Lois and I started playing with the three of you?”

Connie’s eyes rolled up into her head. “Oh, please, that was easy compared to this. We lost a selfish and untrustworthy bass player who was ready to go out on her own at any moment anyway, and you and Lois lost a boy singer who was scared of his own shadow. The two of you slid into the group like we’d all been rehearsing for a month, and we clicked from the very first intro. It was total synchronicity.”

Lucy grinned sideways. “I’m glad you remember it like that.”

“Don’t you?” asked Connie. “I thought the whole two weeks at Marlowe’s was fantastic. You two couldn’t have played better.”

“Yeah, but you guys didn’t want me at first.”

“And we were wrong! You and Lois are exactly what we needed, both of you. And we were exactly what you needed, too. Admit it!”

Lucy lifted her hands and grinned. “Hey, I’ve always said that the five of us getting together was perfect timing. It was even better than Stevie Nicks and Lindsey Buckingham joining Fleetwood Mac when they did. And look where they went.”

“We’re not going to have the same kinds of trouble they did, though,” answered Connie. “For one thing, none of us do drugs or drink, and for another, you’re just not my type.”

Lucy chuckled and nudged her with one elbow. “Too bad for you, girlfriend. You don’t know what you’re missing.”

Lois turned and gave her sister a mock frown. “Cut it out, Lucy. If there were any guys in this band, we’d have to chain you to the bus to keep you away from them and you know it. I still say you’re the one who scared Tim all the way back to his mommy.”

“Sure I did,” countered Lucy. “You know I wouldn’t have actually done anything to him, even if he’d wanted me to.”

“Yeah, I know, Punky. When it comes to guys, you’re all hat and no cattle.”

Lucy stifled a laugh. “I can’t help it if I’m a traditionalist at heart. But I still think Tim hooked up with Jennifer’s band. Of course, she needed him like she needed another hole in her head.”

Lois grimaced. “He’s not playing with her. Last I heard, Tim was going to school to become a computer programmer. And according to the latest issue of Downbeat, Jennifer’s latest album is going to be shipped gold.”

Connie raised her eyebrows. “Shipped gold? Wow. I guess she’s doing pretty well, then.”

“She is if you don’t count her divorce from her manager. She and Albert Townsend get along fine in business but not as real

people.”

Connie sighed. “Too bad for Jen. She always did have dollar signs in her eyes. Along with a morbid fear of her fortieth birthday.”

Lucy lifted one eyebrow. “Should we send her a card?”

Connie snorted. “Oh, yeah, she’d love that. How about one that reads, ‘Have a great fortieth birthday! Sorry your career is almost over!’”

Before Lucy or Lois could stop laughing, a worried-looking Ramona entered the backstage area. “We have a problem.”

It was Lucy’s turn to roll her eyes. “Christie’s stoned again, isn’t she?”

“No, she’s fine, or at least she’s as fine as she ever is. Shamika managed to keep her sober after rehearsal. It’s a little more serious than that.”

Lois’ brow drew down. “What could be more serious than Christie drunk or stoned?”

Ramona took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Malcolm is busy calling Ralph on the porcelain telephone.”

Connie paled. “He’s WHAT!”

Lucy and Lois exchanged a puzzled glance to make sure that neither one knew what Ramona meant before Lucy asked, “What are you talking about? What does that mean?”

Ramona lifted one eyebrow. “It means that Malcolm is in the men’s room leaning over a toilet trying to throw up yesterday’s breakfast.”

Lucy sputtered incoherently. Lois growled, “You are talking about Malcolm Hood, the Metro Club sound tech, the guy who moves the sliders on the board and mixes the house and generally makes us sound as good as we can?”

“Very good, Sherlock,” answered Ramona. “You got it on the first try.”

Connie’s hands clenched into fists. “What are we gonna do? We have to have a sound tech! We can’t play without one! We do too many changes to set it and forget it!”

“What about Willie?” asked Lucy. “Isn’t he the backup sound tech?”

“He is when he’s not in jail for violating his parole,” answered Ramona. “The cops picked him up early this afternoon. And before you ask, Virginia is out of town visiting her mother. All three of the house techs are unavailable.”

“Great!” Lois threw up her hands in disgust. “I keep telling everyone that we need a full-time permanent sound tech, but no, we can just use the house tech wherever we play and —”

“That’s enough!” growled Ramona. “Save that discussion for a later time. Right now, say something constructive or don’t say anything.”

Lois glared back but took a deep breath and relaxed slightly. “We have to find a replacement,” she said.

Ramona sighed again. “I know, I know. Easy to say, not so easy to — wait a minute. Wait a minute!” She grabbed Connie by the shoulders. “That bartender!”

Connie frowned. “What bartender?”

“Charlie! The one who isn’t gay! Didn’t he say he used to mix sound in college?”

Connie’s frown slowly turned upside down. “Yeah. Yeah, he did! I bet he’d be great, too!”

“What?” cried Lois. “You’re willing to put our sound — our professional future — in the hands of some half-drunk mostly-deaf washed-up bottle-dropping brainless stumblebum?”

Ramona released Connie. “You have a better idea?” Lois’ mouth opened but no words came out. “Thought so. Lois, you and Connie go talk to Charlie.”

“What? Me? Why?”

“Because Shamika has to keep tabs on Christie, and Lucy and I need to double-check the stage setup and the cable placement so he doesn’t have to guess who’s singing into what mic. Besides, if

Connie can't charm him into it, you're the only one of us who might scare him enough to actually do this."

Lois followed Connie as Ramona and Lucy started checking the equipment. "I still think this is a mistake, Connie."

"Maybe so, but it's better to go down in flames than just give up without a fight."

Lois might have mumbled something about them being dead either way, but no one called her on it.

"Charlie! Hey! Yeah, you, Charlie!"

Clark hesitated for half a second before looking up. He hoped that no one noticed that he hadn't immediately responded to his cover name.

Then he saw who was calling to him and he really hoped that the two women bearing down on him with something close to desperation in their eyes hadn't noticed.

Lois, the one with the short, feathery dark hair — the very attractive one with the very interesting shorthand notes — pointed at him. "You told Ramona you ran sound for a band in college, right?"

He frowned in confusion. "Yeah, but that was —"

She abruptly grabbed his bartender's vest and pulled him away from the bottles he'd been arranging. "Come with me!"

He took two stumbling steps before he recovered his balance and stopped moving. He disengaged Lois' hand as gently as he could, then looked from one woman to the other. "What are you two maniacs doing?"

Connie stepped between him and the crazy bass player. "Please, Charlie, we're desperate! We don't have a sound tech for tonight's show and we have to have one. Won't you help us?"

Clark's mouth dropped open in surprise. "Sound tech? For you girls? Tonight? With no rehearsal? You gotta be kidding!"

"No, Charlie," Connie pleaded, "we're not kidding. But we really are desperate. We have to have someone at the board who knows what he's doing. You're the only other person in the club we can ask to do this. Please?" She stepped closer, then put her hands on his chest and lowered her voice a register. "Please, Charlie? For me?"

Behind her, Lois rolled her eyes. "He's not buying it, Connie. You sure he's not gay?"

Clark ignored Lois' last remark and lifted his hands to either side. "Look, it's not that I don't want to help, but I was hired as a bartender, not a sound tech. It's not my decision to make."

Lois planted her hands on her hips. "Fine. I'll find Toni Taylor and ask her. Will you do it if she okays the switch?"

Clark shrugged helplessly. "Yeah, I guess so. Sure. If Ms. Taylor says it's okay, I'll give it a try."

Connie pulled his head down and kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks, Charlie! You're a prince!"

"Just don't expect any miracles, okay?"

"No problem. Hey, come on over to the board and I'll go over the set list with you. Lois, can you find Toni and let her know what's going on?"

Lois blew out a short blast of air. "Sure, fine. This guy better not be lousy, that's all I have to say." Then she spun on her heel and strode away.

Clark followed Connie to the sound booth, which was really just a raised dais near the back of the room just off the dance floor. "Twenty-four main channels, four sub-mixes, one main mix. That's the house level. We don't do any stereo stuff and all the instruments come through the board, including the drums. Everything's labeled with names, not just numbers."

He looked over the board and nodded. "Two monitor mixes? One for the stage and one for the drummer?"

She beamed at him and bounced on the balls of her feet. "Yes! That's exactly right! And the stereo fifteen-band equalizer is set up for the mains on the left and the stage monitor on the

right. The monitor signal for the drummer goes through the separate equalizer and amp over here." She grabbed his collar and pulled him down to her level, then kissed him enthusiastically. "Oh, Charlie, you're going to be great tonight!"

He shook his head. He just hoped he wouldn't turn out to be lousy. And if one of them had to kiss him, why couldn't it be the brunette?

Toni waved her hands between herself and Lois. "Wait, wait! Tell me all that again, a little slower this time."

Lois frowned at her. "Malcolm is the only sound tech in the building tonight, and he's barfing in the boy's room. He can't work the show. Ramona thinks that the new bartender, Charlie something —"

"Charlie King?"

"Yeah, him. Anyway, Ramona thinks he can mix for us. He doesn't want to do it without your permission. Something about not being hired for the job."

Toni allowed herself a small smile. Charlie certainly seemed to be following all the rules so far, so she could afford to bend this one for the girls in the band. Maybe she could get him to bend the one about management and labor not dating, too. It had been a while since she'd been with a man who was interested in her as a woman and not her as a means to an end.

She suddenly realized that Lois was still waiting for her answer. "Yes, of course. If Charlie can help you out, he can run the board tonight."

Just then the new waitress, the blond who'd been in the conference room when Johnny had shot off both his mouth and his handgun, ran up to her. "Ms. Taylor, we gotta call an ambulance. Malcolm is still tryin' to toss his cookies but nothin's coming up, and now he's runnin' a fever. One o' the other girls thinks he's got food poisoning or maybe something worse."

Toni nodded at the girl — Linda, that was her name, the new girl with the bladder control issues. "Okay. You stay with him until the ambulance gets here, but then you get cleaned up and get back on the floor. We're going to be short one bartender tonight with Charlie helping the band, and we can't be short on wait staff too."

The girl's eyes landed on Lois and narrowed for a moment, then she nodded. "Yes ma'am! I'll go make that call."

As Linda trotted off, Toni turned to Lois and said, "Maybe Charlie can run sound for more than just one night."

Lois hesitated, then shook her head and refocused on Toni. "That's assuming we don't kill him for screwing up our show first."

Toni laughed. Lois didn't.

Then Toni added, "And that's also assuming the union doesn't pitch eleven kinds of hissy fits over a non-union guy doing a union job."

Toni shook her head once. "I'll take care of that. If Charlie survives the night and you need him tomorrow, I'll make sure he gets his local card."

"Thanks, Toni. You're a peach."

"No problem. Now you girls go knock 'em dead."

Lois' eyes flickered — just for an instant — then she grinned and spun away. Toni wondered about that eye flicker. It wasn't the first time she'd seen it. Was there more to Lois Lane than just a nice body, great voice, and spider fingers on her bass? Did she know something specific about the Metro Club's real businesses? Was that why she always seemed to hear more than Toni had meant about knocking them dead?

Toni shook her head. No time for that now. There were hungry and thirsty customers waiting for the band to go on so they could dance the night away, and she had all the beans she could stuff in her mouth at the moment without borrowing any more trouble. Besides, she still had to make sure Christie was

sober enough for the second set, and that was getting to be a bigger and more time-consuming chore every night.

Lois forced her heart to slow down as she crossed the club floor back to the sound booth. She'd dodged another bullet, maybe a literal one. If Linda had recognized her, she hadn't said anything. Maybe enough time had passed and Lois' looks had changed enough so that Linda wasn't sure and wouldn't do or say something stupid and get Lois killed.

Either way, she had a gig to play. And with a rookie sound tech. What else could go wrong?

Lois tapped Connie on the shoulder. "We got Toni's okay. He can run the sound tonight."

Connie waved over her shoulder. "Great! Look, Charlie, you do it like you're talking about it and you'll be just fine."

Lois leaned closer. "It's time for the first set, Connie. He'd better be ready right now."

Connie turned and grinned at Lois. "I think he's gonna be great!" She turned back to the bartender-turned-soundman and pointed both index fingers at him. "Be great, man!"

He gave both women an electric smile. "Break a leg!"

Lois nodded shortly and turned to stride to the stage, trying to shake off the impact of that smile. "What — uh — what were you two talking about when I walked up?"

Connie skipped closer to Lois. "We were talking about mixing, about how he does it. He blends the bass in with the drums to lay the foundation, then lays the rhythm guitar and piano above that, then the vocals with lead guitar or the piano on top if it's taking the lead, and it's like a cake with all those layers! I've never known a sound guy who thought that deeply about what he does."

"Yeah? I just hope we don't have to deal with feedback roaring through the monitors all night."

"If you'd only let us use those in-ear monitors —"

"No! Hate 'em! I can't hear what I need to hear with those things, and I've never known any house tech who'd take the time to mix them right. Just give me a floor wedge or a hot spot with the lead vocal and my voice and I'm happy, as long as I can hear my amp and get in the pocket with Shamika. I can move around to change what I hear with stage monitors, but I can't do that with the ear buds. If we ever get a permanent sound tech, maybe, but until then, definitely not."

"Okay. Sheesh, you haven't gotten any less picky with age, have you?"

Lois stopped short. "Not tonight, Connie, please. No teasing tonight. This show is way too important to me."

Connie lifted her hands in surrender. "Okay! I'm sorry, Lois. I was just trying to ease the tension."

"I know. Let's just save it until after the last set. I'm sure I'll need some of my tensions eased by then."

Connie's mouth twitched. "I bet Charlie could take care of that, too."

"Cut it out, Connie!" That hit closer to the mark than Lois was willing to admit, even to herself.

Connie laughed. "Okay, okay! Come on, let's get strapped up and plugged in. Maybe Christie won't be too far gone to follow the arrangements tonight."

Lois snorted. "As long as you're asking for miracles, why not wish up that album deal?"

"Sure. And for Lucy to get about three inches taller so her whole face will show up in the cover photo."

Lois hid her smile behind a sigh. "If we're gonna wish for the moon, let's ask for Ramona to develop a sharper sense of humor."

Connie elbowed her in the side. "And maybe a boob job for Shamika?"

Despite her trepidation, Lois burst out laughing. Still, there was something about this guy Charlie that didn't sit quite right

with her, something that didn't fit the image he was working hard to portray, something that compelled her to look closer. And for the first time in a long time, she wanted to look closer at one particular guy. A lot closer.

But there wasn't time to puzzle it out now. She could only hope that he didn't deafen the customers with feedback or electrocute the band on stage. Anything more than that would be gravy.

>>>> Fever

The last notes of the final song of the first set still rang in the audience's ears while the curtain closed in front of the six women and the applause broke over them in waves. They smiled and waved and bowed and enjoyed the approval of the crowd. All but Lucy, that is.

Lucy didn't just enjoy it. She loved it, cherished it, reveled in it. She'd craved approval and validation from her parents when she was young, but when she hadn't received what she thought she'd needed, she'd looked for it elsewhere. After her father's death, she'd been heading for a life of drugs and booze and cheap, tawdry sex when her sister had dragged her to a guitar lesson, and the sound of the strings ringing out had captivated her. Hearing Lois' instructor play at that lesson had changed the course of the twelve-year-old girl's life forever.

She loved the guitar. She loved the keyboard. She loved the drums. She loved playing them, holding them, reading about them. She couldn't get enough of any of them. Her mother and stepfather had, at first, indulged what they'd believed was merely a phase, but when Lucy had begun playing in high school garage bands which actually earned money for playing, they'd tried to steer her into a "better" type of music and a "higher" class of people. She'd resisted at first, but when she was hired to play drums in a teenage big band doing Miller and Goodman and others, she'd blossomed both musically and personally. She'd learned some of Buddy Rich's and Gene Krupa's techniques and had memorized their solos.

The experience Lucy had gained in that group couldn't be found in any university. She learned not only what to play, she learned what not to play. She learned when to attack the beat and when to lay back, when to play with flash and when to just keep the band in the pocket. She brought that understanding to her keyboard and to her guitar, and she learned to be the ideal bandmate, one who played for the success of the song instead of her own glory. And when she began playing drums and guitar after high school with Lois, who by this time had decided to focus on vocals and bass, they learned to lock in together and become a single unit.

When she and her sister had joined the Mountaintops, she'd shown herself to be a steady rhythm player and second guitarist. She never stepped on Connie's parts or tried to take over a solo that the others hadn't all but insisted that she play. She'd worked with Shamika on the drums, first listening and learning but then sharing and teaching, so that both women not only enjoyed sharing the drummer duties but looked forward to hearing the other play. The jazz piano styles which didn't interest Ramona became Lucy's by default, and then hers by conquest.

No matter what song the band did, no matter what style, Lucy could contribute to the success of the song and of the group without dominating on stage or in rehearsal. She knew she was good and knew she could have made a living as a soloist or a session player, but she also knew she needed the rest of the Mountaintops to be anything close to famous. And she desperately wanted to be famous. She firmly believed that being famous would bring her the inner peace she'd sought for so long.

Lucy had never before been around people who were both as monumentally talented and absolutely committed to the success of the group instead of where their names were posted on the

marquee as the women in the Mountaintops. They all exuded that attitude. They lived it. They ate it, they drank it, they slept in it, they awoke in it. And — besides her sister Lois — they were the closest thing to family Lucy had left.

The rest of the women had already pulled off their instruments and moved away from the curtain, but Lucy closed her eyes and listened to the last trailing dregs of applause from the dance floor. She soaked it in and sighed, wanting more.

“Lucy?” She ignored Shamika’s call at first. “Hey, jazz girl!”

That got her attention. She suppressed a smile and unplugged her guitar. “What you want, rocker woman?”

She sneaked a glance at Shamika’s face, and the other woman’s face was fighting a smile just as hard as Lucy’s was. “Come on, jazz girl, we got to get ready for the soft and easy stuff. You know, set up the drums for you and such. And Connie got to go through the set list with Charlie, so you and me got to make sure we on the same page.”

Lucy’s grin finally broke through. “So, how do you think Charlie did mixing us his first time?”

Shamika shook her head. “He musta done good. I didn’t even know it was him ‘stead o’ Malcolm till halfway through the set.”

“We didn’t tell you because we didn’t want Christie to get spooked.”

“Yeah, well, I guess it worked. Maybe she been scared straight.”

Lucy’s smile faded. “I think it would take more than that to straighten her out.”

Ramona glanced up from the set list at their provisional lead vocalist. “Hi, Christie. You ready to get changed and do the next set?”

Christie shook her head. “I want to change my solo.”

Ramona’s eyes slowly widened. “You — you what?”

“I want Lucy on the piano on my solo song.”

“But — but we rehearsed it with Lucy on drums and me on piano! We all know what to expect and what to play!”

Christie shook her head and flipped her hair back and forth. “No. We have to change it.”

“Come on, Christie! You know we can’t change it now! It’s too late for that!”

Christie’s voice was firmer than her sense of balance, but she managed to put even more determination into her words. “I want Lucy to play the piano for me.”

Ramona tried to keep her composure. “Christie, we can’t make this switch now! The next set starts in fifteen minutes. We rehearsed this song with me on piano and Lucy on brushes. That’s the way it’s got to be.”

Like a stubborn child, Christie folded her arms and pushed out her lower lip. “No. Lucy has to play the piano on this song. She’s better on it than you are.”

The comparison stung, but Ramona forced herself to stay calm. “Look, let me go get Toni and we can —”

“No!” Christie put her hands on her hips and glared into Ramona’s eyes. “You want me to lay out on two songs in this set, don’t you? I will — if Lucy plays this one song for me.”

Just then Shamika walked up beside them. “There you are! I been lookin’ all over for you, Christie! C’mon, we gotta get ready for the next set. Them rocker clothes got to go. It’s time for some cool jazz attitude.”

Ramona took a breath to speak, but Christie spun around and beat her to it. “Shamika! Can you play drums on ‘Fever?’”

“What?” Shamika looked at Ramona, who rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Yeah, sure I can, but not as good as Lucy. She got that jazz-brush thing down to a fine art.”

“But you can play it, right?”

Shamika frowned. “Course I can. But why do I need to? Lucy get sick or somethin’?”

Ramona pinched the base of her nose with her thumb and forefinger. “Christie wants Lucy to play the piano for that song. I told her that we can’t switch it up fourteen minutes before the set starts.”

Christie pointed one finger at Ramona’s face. “And I told you that if you want me to sit out for those other two songs, Lucy Lane had better play piano for my solo!”

Shamika’s mouth dropped open. “What? Where you come up with this?”

“It doesn’t matter!” Christie snapped. “This is my song and this is the way I want it! Now are you going to play drums so Lucy can play the piano on this song or not?”

Ramona looked into the taller woman’s face and remembered that Shamika, despite her athletic ability, physical strength, determination and excellent hand-eye coordination, hated fighting and conflict with a passion. She could usually bluff her way out of a fight just by looking menacing, and when that failed she nearly always withdrew from a position of disdain for her challenger. Ramona secretly believed that Shamika was afraid — not of losing or of being hurt, but afraid of seriously hurting someone else, afraid of repeating a mistake from her youth. So she simply stepped back from conflict as if it were beneath her.

But that strategy wouldn’t work this time. Christie had them over a barrel and she knew it. If they wanted her to keep her word and sit out for those two songs, they’d have to switch the arrangement of ‘Fever’ at the last minute. And if they wanted a shot at the financing Toni was dangling in front of them, Christie had to sit out for those two songs.

It wasn’t impossible. Lucy would switch from drums to piano, Shamika would switch from rhythm guitar to drums, Ramona would simply sit out, and they’d just leave the second guitar part out. It wouldn’t stop the song, and might even be a little edgier that way. Connie liked having the extra guitar in there even if Shamika was only playing the changes, but she didn’t see that she had a choice.

Ramona sighed. “Okay, we’ll do it. Shamika, you find Lucy and tell her that I set this up. Maybe she won’t be quite so mad.”

“You sure this what you want, Mona?”

“No. But that’s the way we’re going to do it tonight.”

“Okay.” Shamika hurried off on her errand.

Ramona turned to Christie. “You sing this like we rehearsed it, you understand? Don’t break the tempo, don’t throw in extra choruses, and for crying out loud don’t embarrass us! If you screw up this song, I’ll turn Lucy AND Lois loose on you at the same time. And Shamika won’t hold either one of them back. In fact, she’d probably hold you down.”

Christie smirked in victory. “Don’t worry, Ms. Wilcox. You girls won’t have to change a note.”

“Fine. Now get changed fast and get back here and be ready to go on. And don’t bring anything to drink!”

Ramona watched Christie slink away with a victory roll in her hips. She hoped she hadn’t just made a terrible mistake.

The first four songs went off without a hitch. Christie had even smiled and backed away from her microphone as unobtrusively as she ever did anything when the Mountaintops started a smooth quartet version of “Route 66” that featured Lois’ inspired bass work. Ramona was beginning to think that things were going to work out just fine as she vacated the piano bench for Lucy. She slid back out of the lights and listened as Lois introduced Christie’s featured solo for the set with her rich bass lines.

Shamika slipped in with her brushes almost as smoothly as Lucy would have as Christie began snapping the fingers of one hand in time with the beat. She slithered to the microphone and breathed out, “You’ll never know how much I love you, never know how much I care.” Ramona followed Christie’s gaze to one

side of the audience, expecting to see Johnny Taylor there grinning fatuously at his talented but troubled girlfriend.

But it wasn't Johnny who was the target of Christie's vocal seduction.

The man was sitting alone in a booth along the outside wall, smiling and sipping a tall drink. He was dressed in a charcoal business suit, immaculate white shirt, and black dress shoes that reflected the stage lights all around. He appeared to be in his late thirties, with wavy brown hair that just cried out for some woman to help him tame it. And he followed Christie's every move with dark, hooded eyes.

As she slipped into the chorus, it became obvious to everyone in the building who Christie was singing to. Ramona glanced around the room, hoping that Johnny wasn't anywhere near the scene.

No such luck. He was standing in the back next to a big guy in a cheap suit who was chewing on the wooden end of a match. Johnny's face showed his astonishment and he appeared to be rooted to the spot. The big man's attempts to get Johnny's attention went unheeded.

She's crazy, thought Ramona. She's gone absolutely nutso. Johnny's going to shoot her dead right here on stage and then he's going to shoot us because we're witnesses. We won't record our album because we'll be dead. And Christie will never get to record that album of torch songs she says she wants to —

Record an album —

Suddenly it all made sense. Christie was singing to the money man, the guy with the deep pockets who'd asked them — through Toni — to sing two songs without her. And she knew who the guy was! She was trying to undercut them and get the recording deal they'd worked so hard to get!

Ramona clenched one hand into a fist and almost slammed the wall with it, but stopped herself just in time. Christie was still making love to the microphone and all but offering herself to the man in the charcoal suit. Her price — one lush-sounding album and lots of promotion — might as well have been outlined in flashing neon above the stage.

Ramona glanced around to the other girls in the band. Shamika was ignoring Christie so she could stay locked in with Lois. But Lois — who was staring at Christie as if the singer had just turned into a werewolf — had actually missed an entire measure, something which had never happened in Ramona's memory. Connie had stopped trying to play harmony lines and ornaments behind the vocal and was playing just the chord changes with her teeth gritted in cold fury.

Lucy was doing her best to support Christie's flights of vocal fancy, even when they took the singer to the edge of the grand piano and then on top of it. Ramona had never played for a singer who'd crawled onto the piano top during a song, and she was fairly sure Lucy hadn't either, but so far the brown-haired pianist hadn't missed a note. She was focused on staying in time, and even though Christie played with the timing within the phrases, she kept her promise not to change the basic arrangement.

She hadn't promised not to sing the song like a porn star on Quaaludes, though. Ramona would definitely make that stipulation clear the next time Christie pulled a stunt like this. Assuming, of course, that Lois or Connie didn't kill her first.

As Christie finished the final "What a lovely way to burn" coda while sprawled on her back on the piano top, Connie played an extended closing arpeggio over Lucy's final chord. The men in the room slowly came to their feet and bombarded the stage with applause. Even Charlie, sitting at the sound board, seemed to come back to life with a deep breath. Most of the women in the audience stepped possessively close to one man or another as everyone stood and banged their hands together.

There were two exceptions. One was the debonair man in the charcoal suit. He allowed Christie to catch his eye, then he lifted

his glass to her and took a small sip. Ramona wondered what that meant.

The other man who wasn't overwhelmed by Christie's performance was her gangster boyfriend. Ramona watched as Johnny took a step towards the stage, then looked around and apparently decided to deal with Christie privately. Too many witnesses, too many paying customers to take care of her at the moment. He spun on his heel and almost ran to his office. Ramona was sure he'd slap her senseless later.

Christie slid down from the piano and stepped to the edge of the stage, out of position and in front of everyone else. Ramona mentally yelled at her to get back. They couldn't begin the next song in the set as long as she stood there. Instead, Christie lifted her mic and shouted, "Thank you!" The applause thundered even louder. She bowed, then turned and waved to the other four women on stage and gestured for them to take a bow with her. They hesitated, but then displayed brittle smiles and complied with her wishes.

She lifted the microphone again. "Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to know that I could not possibly have sung that song without the wonderful talents of these ladies behind me. Please, give it up for the Mountaintops!"

The applause reached an even greater crescendo. Ramona didn't know if the rest of the girls were grateful for Christie's grandiose gesture, but she was furious. With one statement, she'd relegated them to backup band status and had made a blatant play for the alpha female slot in the group while complimenting them all in the most backhanded manner possible. Christie's cunning was completely transparent. How could they be upset with her now after she'd shared all that credit with them? How could they deny Christie her proper place in the musical pecking order?

Ramona caught the predatory gleam in Christie's eyes as everyone shifted back to their usual positions for the rest of the set. Had Ramona been closer, she was sure she would have smelled the other woman's victory pheromones.

Cold anger washed through her. Tomorrow, thought Ramona, is another day. We'll see who comes out on top in this competition.

Assuming, she mused, that a mountain doesn't fall on Christie first.

>>>> Hit Me With Your Best Shot

As the second set ended and the curtain slid shut, Lucy fairly leaped up from the drum throne and headed for the stage exit in front of Christie. Lois put her bass on its stand and switched off her amp before she turned to follow. Shamika put her guitar on its stand and moved to the drum set to break it down for the night. Connie turned off her amp and unplugged her pedals to save the batteries. Ramona gathered the set list sheets and chord charts from the various music stands around the stage. Except for Lucy's abrupt exit, it looked like the normal end of a late-night set for the Mountaintops.

But it wasn't normal. And they all knew it.

Lois stopped at the rear exit and turned to watch what happened next. The club's featured singer glanced warily around the stage. Instead of immediately heading off to her dressing room, Christie lingered near Shamika. The tall black woman refused to look at Christie as she released the fittings on the high hat cymbals. "That was a good set, Sham," offered Christie. "Don't you think so?"

Shamika leaned down and released the kick drum chain. "It was just fine 'till you started that lousy Jenna Jameson impression."

Christie tapped the bigger woman's shoulder with her fist. "Oh, come on! I was just performing for the audience! And they loved it!"

Shamika sat up and looked into Christie's eyes. "Don't try to

be all nice and sweet and girly with me, specially not now. We both know you ain't my friend. Everybody know you just out for yourself."

Christie took a step back. "Well — okay, Shamika. I'm sorry you feel that way."

Lois watched Shamika's shoulders tighten, and as much as she might like to see the drummer get physical with someone for a change instead of ignoring a conflict, she couldn't let that happen before Lucy had her say. She took Christie's arm and pulled her towards the stage exit. "Come on, Christie, there are some people out here waiting to talk to you."

Ramona and Connie followed close behind them, both wearing faces one might see at someone else's execution. Behind them, Shamika put both her sticks and Lucy's in the stick bag hanging on the floor tom. She was unscrewing Lucy's small ride cymbal when Lois guided Christie through the stage door. Lois had no more stepped down from the stage when Lucy aimed an open-handed slap at Christie and missed only because Lois pulled Christie back at the last moment. Lois then jumped forward and grabbed her sister in a bear hug, then pulled the smaller woman away from her intended victim.

"You can't beat it out of her, Punky! Now stop it!"

"Watch me!"

"No, Luce! Cut it out! Talk but don't punch!"

Lucy was so mad she was blowing out spit as she hissed at Christie. "You are so stupid! You're cheating us and you're cheating yourself! You might as well just put a gun to your head now and save the booze and drugs for someone else! You deserve to die!"

Lois watched the impact of Lucy's words on Christie as the singer paled and gasped. "Lucy! I — I'm sorry. I didn't know — you — I thought — please!" It was a convincing performance, and Lois wondered if it was real or if it wasn't just good acting on Christie's part.

Lois finally released her sister, but Lucy wasn't finished. "We're the reason the club's full every night! They aren't coming to hear you! They're coming to hear us! We're not your pet backup band! We're going to be playing in arenas and concert halls and winning awards when you're singing drunk at dives and cheap bars and whorehouses where they don't care how you sound! You're a joke, Mom! You don't —"

Everyone froze. Lucy's outburst — and her addressing Christie as "Mom" — stunned them all into immobility. If any of them had known about Lucy's identification of Christie with her mother, none of them had spoken aloud about it.

And their compassion and empathy showed in their faces. Even Shamika, the band's designated observer from afar, seemed to feel Lucy's pain.

The scene held for a moment, then Christie stepped forward and lifted her hand as if to touch the younger woman's face. But Lucy saw the movement and darted around all of them and slammed into the dressing room she shared with Lois. A moment later, they all heard the click of the lock.

Ramona sighed. "Christie, I think you'd better go home. We'll talk about this tomorrow before rehearsal. I want you to be here an hour early. Do you think you can do that?"

Christie bristled at Ramona's tone. "Yes, I think I can do that! What kind of —"

She broke off whatever she'd been about to say as Lois put her fists on her hips and stepped forward. Christie took a deep breath and softly said, "I'm sorry. I know what kind of — whatever — you think I am." Christie took a deep breath. "Will this be a meeting with the whole band or just with you?"

Ramona glanced at Lois, who nodded back microscopically. Ramona's expression softened. "I think it should just be you, me, and Lois. Is that okay with you?"

Christie nodded to Ramona. "That's fine. One-thirty, right?"

"That's right. We'll see you then."

Christie looked at Connie, who crossed her arms and turned away. Then Christie caught Shamika's eyes and voiced a silent entreaty of some kind, but Shamika was no more inclined to listen than was the guitarist. Shamika held Christie's eyes and slowly shook her head back and forth in a 'no' gesture.

Christie sighed and dropped her gaze. "Fine. I'll see you all tomorrow at rehearsal."

No one spoke or moved as Christie trudged to her dressing room. When she came out a moment later, she was wearing a windbreaker over her stage clothes. She walked to the rear exit without looking at the other four women.

The closing of the outer door broke the spell. Connie glared at Ramona. "You are going to read her the riot act, aren't you?"

Ramona's mouth flattened. "I'm going to talk to her, Lois is going to talk to her, we're going to listen to Christie, and if she agrees to behave herself from here on out we'll probably stay. If not, either she goes or I call up the Styles Club and we head out to Gotham as soon as he'll take us, if not before. There's a limit to the amount of crap this band will take."

Shamika asked, "Do we all get a vote on this?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "Of course you get a vote, Sham! Nobody's forcing anybody to do anything."

"Good." Shamika took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then said, "I vote we put Christie and Lucy in a mud wrestling pit in hot pink bikinis and sell tickets. Prob'ly make a fortune."

The other three stared at her for a long moment, then Connie snorted a laugh. Ramona allowed herself a chuckle, and Lois hid her grin behind her hand. The tension was broken, at least for the four of them, which was what Shamika the peacemaker had apparently been trying for.

Lois waved her hands in front of her. "Save it for open mic night at the comedy club, Sham. Let's all get some sleep, okay? We're going to need it."

"That's for sure," responded Shamika. "You got to stop yawning between songs, Lois, or the audience gonna think you having too much fun offstage."

Lois grinned at her again. "I have to change before we leave. Are we all riding back to the hotel together?"

"I'm in," said Connie. Shamika nodded her agreement.

"I think we're all together," said Ramona. "You'd better check on Lucy, though. She might want to be alone for a while."

"Yeah, you're right." Lois crossed to the dressing room in which Lucy had locked herself and knocked twice. "Lucy? Hey, you okay in there?"

There was no answer, so she knocked again. "Hey, Sis, I have to get changed." Still no response. "And I really gotta pee! Let me in!"

After a long moment, the lock clicked and the door opened slightly. Lucy looked out and muttered, "Why don't you go in Christie's dressing room?"

"She locks her bathroom. I can't go in there."

"Her clothes are in there. Just pee in her shoes and use her underwear to mop up the overflow."

After a moment, Lois smiled at her sister. "Can I please come in?"

Lucy hesitated, then pushed the door open. "Sure. Be sure to bring your psych textbooks so you can tell me all about my childhood trauma and my repressed resentment of my mother and how it's eating away at me and poisoning my — my young adult life."

Instead of walking past her sister, Lois reached out and embraced her. Lucy's arms slowly folded around Lois' back and her head sank into Lois' shoulder. The sobs forced themselves past clenched lips and the tears battled past barricaded eyes.

Connie and Ramona traded a look, then Connie motioned to Shamika. The three of them gathered around their distressed

friend and musical partner and they all hugged her, patted her shoulders, gently stroked her hair, and murmured their unending support to her.

Shamika was an only child, and despite growing up around assorted cousins and aunts and uncles and so forth, she'd never bonded with anyone her own age like she'd bonded with Lucy. Even her tight friendship with Ramona and Connie didn't compare with her feelings for Lucy Lane. Shamika had adopted the spunky young girl from their first meeting and had supported her in every way she could. She had, on two separate occasions, threatened insistent young men who didn't understand the word 'no' with bodily harm if they refused to leave the jazz girl alone. When Shamika was around, no one outside the band was allowed to say anything negative to Lucy. At times, Shamika had even warned Lois to back off from smothering her sister. And Lucy was the one in the group who got along best with Shamika's mother.

Shamika thought about her own mother, how her mom had always supported her and encouraged her, how they wrote letters back and forth as often as was practical, and how they spoke on the phone at least once a week. She didn't know what Lucy's pain felt like, but she did know that her friend was hurting, and she desperately wished she could help take the pain away.

And she decided that if she had any chance to help Lucy, she'd take it. Whatever it might be, whatever she might have to do.

Lucy was drained. Between the high of playing onstage and the low of blowing up at Christie and the crying jag she'd gone on afterwards, she just wanted to get some sleep. The five of them had crowded into one of the club's cars for the short trip back to their hotel, and Lucy was more than ready to hit the sheets and let sleep claim her.

Ramona, Connie, and Shamika headed upstairs to their room on the second floor. Lois put her arm around Lucy's shoulders and guided her to the elevator. "Come on, Punky. We'll be lazy tonight and take the elevator all the way to the third floor."

Lucy's head dropped against her sister's shoulder. "Fine with me. I'm wiped out."

But the message light was lit up on the phone, and Lucy pondered checking it while Lois went into the bathroom. It might actually be important, and if not, she'd relay it to whoever needed to hear it when they met for breakfast.

Lucy dialed the voicemail code and closed her eyes. A yawn forced her jaws to their limit as she sat through the electronic message prefix. Someone had called just after the last set had ended tonight. Probably a fan, or maybe a groupie. Or some crank who'd found their phone number somehow.

Then the message started. "Lucy? This — this is Christie. We need to talk."

Lois had changed into her sleeping clothes and had just put the toothbrush in her mouth when Lucy knocked on the door. "Lois? I have to go out for a little bit. I'll be back soon."

"Hawt? Whurmpgh?" She bent over and spit out a mouthful of toothpaste, then called out, "Lucy? Where are you going?" There was no answer. "Lucy!"

Lois opened the bathroom door and looked around in the small room. No Lucy, no place for her to hide, and one of the card keys was gone from the desk beside the television. She considered getting dressed to follow her sister, but Lucy had too much of a head start. Unless she tried to chase her sister down barefoot while wearing a flannel sweatshirt and boxers, Lois would never catch her.

She just had to hope that whatever Lucy had to do, it was as important as she seemed to think it was.

Christie couldn't stop pacing. She didn't know if Lucy would call back or not, or if she'd just show up at the apartment, or if she'd completely ignore Christie's call. She'd left both her address and phone number on the message, but there was no telling what Lucy might do.

And all of her speculation about Lucy's possible reactions depended on whether or not the girl had even listened to the voice message. Maybe it was too late to fix things, maybe she'd messed up once too often and finally alienated the other girl, but she had to try. After all, this might be the very thing Lucy was hoping for too. It was the reason Christie had demanded that Lucy play for her solo.

Christie stalked to the refrigerator and opened it. She surveyed the meager assortment of beverages and snacks, and then her eyes found the open bottle of Johnny Walker Tennessee Whiskey. She reached out for it, almost as a reflex, then stopped herself.

No. The booze and the drugs were destroying her working relationship with the band. They were wrecking her ability to focus on the music. And she desperately wanted to succeed as a singer. No, there was no way she was going to make things worse. Not tonight.

She snatched a can of diet soda from the bottom shelf and shoved the door shut. As she opened the soda, she thought she heard an echoing click from the back door of the apartment. Maybe Lucy had come in the building that way. But why would she come up the fire escape?

"Hello?" She took a step into the living room. "Is anyone there?"

Nothing. Great, now she was jumping at shadows and imagined noises.

Just then the front door buzzer rang. She jerked in surprise and spilled soda on her top. She stopped to grab a napkin and the buzzer rang again.

Maybe that was Lucy. Maybe this would work after all.

She sprinted to the buzzer and pressed the call button. "Hello? Who's there?"

"It's Lucy. You wanted to talk to me."

Christie breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you so much for coming, Lucy. Let me buzz you in. My apartment's to the left of the top of the stairs, second floor."

"Be right there."

The intercom went dead and Christie pressed the button to open the front door of the building. She ran back to the kitchen and put the soda back in the refrigerator, then dabbed at her top to soak up as much as she could.

It was no use. And there wasn't time to change. She hoped Lucy would look past her clothing to the opportunity available for her.

Christie opened the door as Lucy got to the landing. "Hey! Glad you made it. Come on in."

Lucy stopped with one hand on the railing around the landing. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"I know it's late —"

"No. It's actually early in the morning. I should be asleep, and so should you. So tell me what's so freakin' important that you have to talk to me right now."

"Lucy, please come in. There's no sense in you standing out in the hallway."

Lucy hesitated at the threshold of the door, then walked in. With her hands in her jacket pockets, she turned in the middle of the living room and faced Christie. "I'm here. Now please tell me whatever it is you so desperately need to tell me."

Christie hesitated, then stepped forward slowly. "Look, Lucy, I know I haven't been all that — cooperative at times. But I want to make a fresh start with you girls, and I think the best way to do

that is to apologize to you for my behavior. I think you're the one who's most bothered by the way things have turned out, and I'd really like to make it up to you."

Lucy nodded. "Good. Be at that meeting with Ramona and Lois and tell them the same thing. And try being straight and sober from now on."

Christie nodded. "I intend to. Really. But there is something else I'd like for you to think about, something along a — a professional vein."

Lucy shrugged. "So tell me already."

"Okay." Christie clasped her hands together and slowly paced beyond Lucy towards the baby grand piano across the room from her. "I know that the Mountaintops are good — you girls are all very good — and believe it or not, you're one of the most talented. You play keyboard, guitar, drums, and you can sing, too. And you can arrange. I've seen your name on some of the charts."

Lucy pivoted to face the other woman. "So? I still don't know why I'm here."

Christie put on her best smile, the one she reserved for the people she most wanted to manipulate. "You're very good at what you do. But so are the other four girls in the band. All of you can sing. Ramona plays piano, Connie plays guitar, Shamika plays drums, and any of them but Shamika could front the group vocally. You're not unnecessary, far from it, but if you couldn't make it to a gig they could still play."

"We've played without you, too. And we were solid."

"I know. The Mountaintops don't need me to be successful. I'm a singer. But I don't play any instrument well enough to make it professionally. I need an accompanist, a musical partner. An equal partner, actually."

Lucy's brow drew down. "I'm still waiting to hear why you called me over."

This was the moment. Christie's next few words might determine the professional future for both of them. "Lucy, I want you to be that equal partner with me. I want you to work with me going forward from now on."

The younger woman's eyes bulged and her jaw dropped. "You — you what?"

"That was why I wanted you to play for me tonight! So we could both know how well we work together! You were marvelous! There was no way I could have sung that song as well as I did with Ramona on piano. I mean, she's good, but you're terrific!"

Lucy shook her head and blinked twice. "You mean that you — you were giving me a tryout? You were auditioning me? That was what all that was about?"

Christie rushed on before Lucy could stop her. "Look around you! All this is from Johnny, but you and I together could build something that would earn each of us thousands of dollars a month! With the contacts we both have and with your piano skills behind my voice, we could take the city by storm. And then we could go on tour! Do you know how much we could earn in Central City or Los Angeles? Not to mention Denver and Houston and Gotham City?"

Lucy's mouth worked but no sound came out. Christie grabbed Lucy's upper arms and waxed rhapsodic. "Just think! We'd have nothing but the best, play only the best places, go anywhere we wanted, maybe even Europe! There's nothing we couldn't do!"

Lucy stepped back out of Christie's grasp and snarled, "Are you insane? You want me to leave my sister and my friends and play for you?"

"You wouldn't be leaving them in the lurch! They could still go on without you as a quartet. And we could even do some shows together! You could still play with them sometimes and —"

"No!" Lucy shoved Christie back a step. "There's no way I'm quitting the Mountaintops! Especially not to play for a drugged-out lush like you! And you'd better not let Johnny hear you talk like that! He'd kill you before he let you leave him!"

"Lucy! Please! Johnny would understand. He'd support me and help us get started. That guy in the audience tonight, the one I was singing to, he's the man with the money Ramona was talking about! He could help us get into a good studio and —"

Lucy slapped Christie across the mouth. "Idiot! You stupid cow! You are just like my mother!"

"No, Lucy, no, I'm not —"

"You are! My dad died and she married a creep who put on a good front but who's rotten inside! Johnny's no better than my stepdad! He doesn't love you! He only wants you for what's between your legs! He'll drop you like a broken doll as soon as you get to be more trouble than you're worth!"

The blow to Christie's mouth had hurt, but not as much as the blows Lucy landed with her words, especially since they didn't have to wend their way through a haze of drugs and alcohol. She was shocked into silence as the younger woman blew out angry breaths through gritted teeth.

Christie tried to speak, to defend herself against the accusations, but nothing came out of her mouth. The slap seemed to jar her brain into gear again, and Christie looked at herself as honestly as she could.

Lucy was right. Johnny didn't love her. She was just a convenience to him. And she was more a liability to the Mountaintops than an asset.

The truth burrowed itself past the receding liquor buzz and her own self-centeredness. It kicked over the smoky dream she'd built as a famous singer working with a talented pianist. The dream shattered against the reality of Johnny Taylor, Christie's self-deception, and Lucy's cruel but truthful assault against her.

She wasn't going to make it big in the music business, at least not with Lucy as her accompanist. Not now. And probably not ever, no matter who played for her, not as she was now.

Lucy's voice dropped a register. "Don't ever say anything else to me about this, Christie! Not a word! If I went back to the motel and told Lois and Ramona what you just said to me they'd clobber you and flush the pieces down that fancy toilet in your dressing room!" She put her face inches from the older woman's. "So if you have the slightest idea what's good for you you'll forget this conversation ever happened! You are the most — you — ugh!"

Lucy growled once more and stomped towards the front door. She yanked it open and left without looking back. The impact of the door slamming rattled the glassware vase on the wall shelf beside the doorway.

Christie stood there for a long moment before she realized that she was crying. She wiped her cheeks with the back of one hand and went to the door to lock it. Instead, she picked up the vase and sighed.

She'd often thought about putting flowers in it, but it was beautiful by itself and she didn't do well with the whole watering the flowers on a regular basis anyway. The vase was over a foot tall, made of solid glass, and was heavy enough to break her toes if she were to drop it on her foot while standing on a solid surface. Its density comforted her somehow, as if reminding her that the sum total of reality didn't depend on her continued existence.

She lifted it and watched it catch the light, watched it scatter colors through the design on the side in a prismatic effect. It had been a present from Johnny, way back in the spring when she'd first moved into her apartment.

This apartment.

The one she'd had no voice in selecting or decorating.

The one where Johnny paid all the bills and gave her a

grocery allowance and spending money almost every week.

The one where Johnny came over and had sex with her whenever he wanted to.

Lucy was right. She was no better than a high-dollar prostitute, a kept woman, a mere mistress. She'd sold herself to a gangster for a few trinkets and the false promise of a singing career.

But she could change. She could live differently. She could be better, do better. She could get out from under Johnny Taylor — literally as well as figuratively — and find work on her own. Surely there was a club in Metropolis that would hire her, even if it was down on the waterfront. And if there wasn't, she'd go wherever she needed to go. She'd start at the bottom and work her way up. She had the time, she had the basic skills, and she had the determination to succeed. She'd take voice lessons, piano lessons, training in stage presence, anything to succeed!

As long as she did it standing up and not on her back.

She turned slowly, examining the vase still in her hands. She didn't need such fancy things like this in her life. She could live simply. She could change her life around. And she could start by making peace with the other girls.

She nodded to herself. That was what she needed to do. And she could —

A hand snatched the vase from her before she knew there was another person in the room. Then the vase slammed into the side of her head just above her right ear before she could look at whoever it was.

She crumpled to her knees with her ears ringing and blood pouring from the wound on her scalp. With her head hanging limp, she looked down to see her blood splattering the deep pile carpet beside her knees. Have to clean that up before it stains, she thought incongruously.

Another blow struck her across her cheek and nose. She felt the crunch of her nose breaking and her head lifted slightly. She tried to look up and see who was hurting her, but her eyes refused to focus.

The vase chopped against the base of her skull and her head slammed forward to the floor. Her face scraped the carpet and she fell on her uninjured side.

She tried to push herself away from the floor, but she couldn't move her hands. Her eyes were covered with blood and she couldn't see anything. She tried to call out to whoever stood above her to stop hurting her, to stop hitting her, but her mouth wouldn't work. She tried to take in a deep breath but she choked on the blood and mucus draining into her mouth.

She wondered briefly who could be so mad at her. And why were they mad? What had she done wrong? She only wanted to be loved. She only wanted —

The vase crashed against the side of her head once again, near the first wound, and the world faded around her. The low buzz she'd heard inside her head since the first blow also faded quickly. She didn't feel the rest of the blows that rained down on her.

Christie Baldwin would never again feel Johnny Taylor's rough hands pull her close to him. She would not become famous as a singer. She would not get her album deal. Nor would she ever sing with the Mountaintops again.

She bled out on her living room carpet, her skull crushed and her body lying in a puddle of her own blood.

>>>> All The Things You Are

Clark met Linda at a coffee shop two blocks down the street from the club. There wasn't much time before his shift started and he didn't want to be late, but he'd agreed to the quick meeting to exchange any last minute information and make sure of their extraction plan, just in case things got sticky.

Linda, of course, wanted to flirt with him.

"Come on, Clark, can't we play hooky just one day?"

"No!" He pulled her hands from around his neck. "I have to be at the club at one and then at two I have to get ready for rehearsal with the band and I don't have time to fool around with you!"

She gave him the best puppy-pout face she had. "Then when will you have the time?"

He sighed deeply. "Let's get this assignment over with first, then we can discuss our personal lives."

She brightened and gave him a quick peck on the lips before he could dodge. "Okay! I don't have to be there until four, so I'll see you later."

He turned to leave, then had a sudden thought. "Linda? If you do any nosing around on your own, you will be careful, won't you?"

"Of course I'll be careful! Don't you worry about me."

He sighed. "Linda —"

She let loose a grating laugh. "Clark! Come on! This is Lucky Linda we're talking about here! And you know how I got that nickname, too. I always get the story."

"Right. And any number of other things, too."

Her face darkened slightly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Look, just don't do anything too risky, okay?"

She nodded sharply and turned away. "Sure, Clark, sure, anything you say."

He watched her stalk away and sighed. No matter what he said or did, Linda refused to understand that Clark wasn't interested in her romantically. And he wasn't sure how much longer he could maintain his presence of mind while she pawed at him or leaned against him in the newsroom or rubbed his shoulders even when he asked her not to.

Maybe he should talk to Perry about the paper's sexual harassment policy. Even then he wasn't sure he could get Linda to back off.

He sighed again. It was time for him to get moving. The bar manager wanted him to help take inventory before they opened, and then he had to run an extended sound check with the band to help him get a better feel for the sound system and for their sound. "Charlie" had already proven that he did what he was told with a cheerful attitude, that he didn't sip from the stock or pocket the cash that customers laid on the bar for their drinks. He didn't argue with the drunks, nor did he try to be a bouncer on the rare occasions when one was needed. He'd even run the soundboard for the Mountaintops, and after the second set they had all told him that he'd done a good job. "Charlie King" was turning into a real find for Toni Taylor and the Metro Club.

But it was an assignment, not a career. He needed to start turning over some solid information on the gang's activities, preferably before Linda stuck her nose into something she couldn't back out of quickly. She might be lucky, but she wasn't always smart. And he still didn't have any hard information on the whereabouts or the identity of one Wanda Detroit. That woman was proving to be as elusive as Linda was persistent.

He hoped he might have a chance to talk to the bass player after rehearsal. All of the women in the band were beautiful, but there was something very special about Lois, something that set her apart from the other talented and accomplished members of the Mountaintops. And it wasn't her musical ability. She had that in spades, of course, but there was something more to her, something he couldn't quite pin down in his mind.

But he did want to pin her — it — down. No! he insisted to himself. Pin it down, Clark, not her! Get your mind out of the gutter, you pervert!

He felt himself turn several shades of pink and red all at the same time. It was a good thing no one was watching him at the moment.

Christie was late for rehearsal.

Again.

And they had to wait for her or risk Johnny's mercurial wrath.

Lois glanced at her watch and sighed. That was fifteen minutes of her life she'd never get back.

Christie hadn't made the meeting with Ramona and Lois which she'd promised to attend the previous night, either. She seemed determined to prove that Lucy was right about her, that she was far more trouble than she was worth.

The entire group seemed glum and lethargic. It didn't help that Lucy was uncharacteristically silent and still. If she hadn't insisted that she felt fine, Lois would have suspected that she was coming down with something. But apparently she wasn't sick, just bummed out after the blowup the night before and her mysterious midnight errand.

Lois had asked her about it that morning, but Lucy had refused to provide any details, insisting that everything was taken care of. Lois didn't like the way that sounded, but if Lucy didn't want to talk about it, Lois wouldn't try to force her to.

The other three weren't much better. Shamika sat off by herself against the curtain, playing drum rudiments on a practice pad. It was her way of distancing herself from conflict and controversy. Despite being the biggest and physically the strongest member of the band, she was the one who was the least likely to fight over anything, whether it was a legitimate problem or not. Her behavior reminded Lois that she, not so very long ago, had dealt with stress in much the same way.

And she remembered what an epiphany it had been when she'd realized that she was causing a large portion of her trouble with her own behavior by not facing her problems. She hoped Shamika would come to a similar realization soon.

Ramona and Connie had begun the waiting time by trying to loosen up the rest of the group with some tasteless and borderline ribald humor, much of it involving Charlie, the new bartender and now the band's preferred sound tech. But they'd given up after failing to engage any of the others in their game, especially after Lois had glared at Connie for making some of her more lurid suggestions. By this time they were whispering to each other and murmuring about future engagements and a possible recording contract. At least, thought Lois, they were trying to be productive, although even they had seemed uncharacteristically morose by this time.

Lois checked her watch once more. Four more minutes had gone by. She'd been sure it had been at least fifteen more minutes of her life lost forever.

Lucy hugged herself again and stared down at her guitar, which was nestled safely on its stand. Lois had often seen her sister behave like that, especially after a violent confrontation between their mother and stepfather during their high school days. Surely, mused Lois, calling Christie 'Mom' during last night's argument was all that was bothering her little sister.

At least, she hoped that was all.

Another glance at her watch. Another two minutes had passed. And even looking at Charlie wasn't going to pass the time any faster, although she thought he looked even nicer now that he'd shaved off that skimpy goatee. He looked a lot better clean-shaven, wearing a tight black short-sleeved shirt that displayed his shoulders to good advantage and his hard, flat abs that just begged for someone to —

No! Stop it! That was enough of that. Johnny Taylor notwithstanding, Christie or no Christie, handsome Charlie or ugly Charlie, they had two sets to play that night and they weren't ready. Somebody needed to get this session moving.

Lois clapped her hands twice and stood. "Okay, ladies, it's time to get up and rehearse. The club has a country and western theme tonight and we're providing the atmosphere for all those

fake buckaroos and their escorts. The first set tonight is all modern country and we have to make sure it flows smoothly."

Lois made eye contact with all the women except for Lucy. She stood closer and put her hand on her sister's shoulder. "Luce? Come on. We need everyone in on this."

Lucy's head came up haltingly. Her eyes wandered aimlessly over the stage at first, then her gaze met Lois'. After a long moment, the younger woman nodded and she gradually rose to stand beside her sister.

"All right!" Lois called out. "Now we're cooking with gas! Let's get this rehearsal going! Ramona, what's our opening song?"

Ramona put a finger on the list. "It's that new Shania Twain song, 'Feel Like A Woman.' You got the lead vocal on that since Christie's not here, right, Lois?"

Lois wiggled her hips in place and abruptly shifted to a dynamic Elvis-like pose with one arm above her head pointed at the ceiling. In a low, husky voice, she said, "I think I can handle it, girls. Thank you very much."

Shamika laughed. "Hey, you got me on rhythm guitar tonight, right?"

"Yes," Ramona answered. "Either electric or acoustic guitar, except for the closer in second set, the Jim Croce tune 'I'll Have To Say I Love You In A Song.' You provide light percussion on that one." She looked up. "Lois, if Christie doesn't make it, are you taking that vocal?"

"No." Lucy's sudden interjection drew everyone's attention. "I want it."

Ramona's questioning gaze met Lois's for a long breath, then Lois said, "I think that's a fine idea. Ramona on string synth, Connie on lead acoustic, Shamika on percussion, Lucy on lead vocal and rhythm guitar, and me on bass. Ramona, are you still doing backup vocals with me?"

"Sure. Hey, are we ready to go over the first set now? Preferably in order?"

Lois snorted lightly. "We'd better. What's the second tune in the first set?"

Ramona grinned. "It's a Hank Williams tune, just two chords and a one-octave vocal range. Even Shamika could do it."

Connie laughed. "You mean I get to play 'Jambalaya' again? All right!" She reached for her guitar and said, "We're still doing the Alabama tune to close the first set, aren't we?"

Ramona nodded. "Of course. The Mountaintops have to play them some Mountain music. We'll be fine as long as no one asks us to play like we're in Texas."

Lucy smiled slightly. "They'd better not. I don't think I could learn to play a fiddle before tonight."

Lois nodded to herself as she checked the tuning on her bass. They'd be fine with or without Christie. Lucy will be fine either way, too.

She just had to be.

Toni walked into the band's dressing room and shut the door behind her. "Christie's not here," she breathed. "And Johnny's acting weird about it."

Shamika snorted. "Since when don't he not act weird about her?"

"Double negative, Sham," said Lois. "That's terrible grammar."

Shamika's eyebrows twisted and she leaned back against the wall. "Don't much care. My grammar don't help us get gigs."

Toni lifted her hand. "Look, ladies, ordinarily I'd be thrilled to listen to you banter back and forth like this, but if Christie doesn't show at the last minute, you'll have to go on without her. Are you ready for that?"

Ramona stood. "We're ready to play. We may need to you run interference between us and Johnny, though."

“Normally I’d be more than ready to do just that. But he’s not as worried about Christie tonight as he has been. It’s like he doesn’t care if she shows up or not.”

Connie frowned. “Maybe he’s as tired of her antics as we are.”

Toni shook her head. “That’s not — “ She stopped abruptly and straightened. “You girls just knock them dead tonight. And break a leg.”

Lois’ eyes flickered at the ‘knock them dead’ phrase again. Before Toni could comment on it, Lucy called out, “Hey, Toni, is that guy with the money here again tonight?”

“You do have your priorities straight, don’t you?”

Lucy shrugged. “Christie wasn’t coming with us anyway. If she stays here, that’s fine with me, and if she moves on, that’s fine with me too, as long as it isn’t with us. But we’re trying to get a record deal and national exposure.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I understand. I think he’ll be here, but I can’t guarantee it, so don’t start hunting for him in the crowd. Even though I know Christie pointed him out to you last night.”

Lois stood. “We’re professionals, Toni. We won’t mess this up for you.”

Toni nodded wearily. “I know, I know. It’s just — I guess Johnny’s got me a little spooked. Let me get out of your hair so you can finish getting ready.”

Ramona said, “Thanks, but all we have to do now is spot tune the guitars. Everything else is hooked up and ready to go.”

“Great. Now all we need is the customers.”

“That’s your job. And you do it well, so stop being such a nervous Nellie.”

Toni sighed wearily. “Thanks. I’ll try.”

Connie asked, “How’s Malcolm feeling? We haven’t heard how he’s doing.”

“Oh! Forgot to tell you. He got out of the hospital late this afternoon, but the doctor told him to stay home for two days and drink lots of fluids. I think Malcolm said he had food poisoning, just like we thought, and his electrolytes had gotten out of whack from all the vomiting. But don’t worry, Charlie will be at the board tonight.”

Lois nodded to her. “Good. I think he’s a natural. He even helped Connie clean up her amp tone during sound check this afternoon.”

Toni’s eyebrows both lifted towards her lacquered hairdo. “Really? This is the same Connie Vandross who all but jumped on Malcolm’s head last week for suggesting that her amp had too much midrange in it?”

Lois smiled. “Yeah. Anyone who can out-charm our own Miss Congeniality is someone special.”

Connie growled low in her throat and glared at Lois. “Don’t mess with the vintage Twin or I will get very upset with you.”

Lois lifted one eyebrow at her. “You know that you’re not near as scary as Shamika, don’t you?”

“I may not sound scary, but I promise that I will be very put out with anyone who messes with my amp.”

Lois chuckled. “Don’t worry! Leo Fender’s legacy is safe from any meddling on my part.”

Toni nodded again. “Okay. You girls ready to go on without Christie?”

They all nodded with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Toni clapped her hands. “Great! Then go knock ‘em dead!”

This time the phrase didn’t make Lois flinch.

But Lucy paled slightly. And Ramona clamped her lips together and narrowed her eyes.

Gotta stop saying that, thought Toni. Might turn out to be bad luck.

And as she turned to resume her duties as hostess, she felt a twinge of jealousy at Lois’ description of Charlie as “someone special.” Even though she and Charlie hadn’t spoken of anything

personal, she still felt something for him. Just what she felt she wasn’t sure, but she was certain that she didn’t want any other woman hanging around him.

Or doing anything else with him, for that matter.

Both sets were incredible that night. Christie didn’t show up and the Mountaintops rocked the house. It was one of those rare nights when every note was golden, every phrase was perfect, and the mix clicked into place early in the first song and didn’t waver for the entire night. Even the breakdown after the last song felt perfect.

Clark declined the doorman’s offer of a ride and walked back to his dingy apartment in the crummy part of town. He knew he was smiling when the night clerk gave him a snarl and grunt for a greeting, but he didn’t care. He ran up the steps and burst into his room, barely able to keep his feet on the floor.

She was terrific. She was fantastic. And she was wonderful. And she didn’t seem to hate him.

During the second set, he’d realized something. It was something he’d never been able to do before, especially not in a crowded night club with nineteen kinds of background noises masking his hearing. But he did it anyway.

He could hear Lois’ heartbeat.

Not while the band was playing loudly, of course, and not after they all skipped off the stage to change after the show. But between songs — and even during two of the softer tunes — he had picked out Lois’ heartbeat as if he were locked in to a radio station.

And that had never happened before. Oh, he could hear someone’s heartbeat in a quiet room if he were close enough, but he’d heard Lois’ heartbeat from over a hundred feet away, over the waitresses taking orders and delivering them, over the rowdy crowd cheering on the band, over Shamika’s drum solo on “Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy,” and even over Lucy’s inspired improvisations during Connie’s vocal on Patsy Cline’s “Crazy.”

He didn’t know what that meant, either. He didn’t know if Kryptonians could hear only certain heartbeats or if hearing Lois’ meant something special, something unique.

And it was a wonderful, resonant, powerful and steady heartbeat. Lois was young and beautiful and talented and driven and —

And he had no real idea what her feelings for him might be. He didn’t know if she secretly worshipped him — unlikely as that was — or if she even took note of his existence, other than as the band’s new favorite sound tech. The truth was probably somewhere in between those two extremes, but until he had some idea of how she felt, he ought to keep his sudden euphoria in check. At least until she fell at his feet, begging him to take her as she was and run away to live a life of sybaritic pleasure with her.

He mentally doused himself with cold water. Yeah, that was gonna happen. Right after he flew out into space and destroyed an asteroid with his bare hands.

>>>> Gonna Get Along Without You Now

After the band’s first set that night — a knockout performance, as always — Toni decided to find her brother, who hadn’t made an appearance all evening. He almost always popped in to count the house or step behind the bar to serve a special customer or lean into the kitchen to yell at the cooks, but he hadn’t done anything like that on this night.

Toni was concerned. Any out-of-character behavior from any of the Metro Gang’s board of directors might bring the kind of scrutiny from law enforcement that they couldn’t afford at the moment. They needed to look like legitimate business people to the outside world. At his best, Johnny was barely five minutes away from a felony arrest, and he hadn’t been at his best recently.

So she stuck her head in his office, checked with the kitchen

staff, the wait staff — who added to her burden when they told her that the new waitress was missing in action and no one else had been able to take a break so far, yet another violation of the loosely enforced labor laws in that part of Metropolis — the front door and backstage security, but no one had seen him since he'd come in around five o'clock that afternoon. And Toni was about to shift from concerned to downright worried. He just wasn't anywhere.

Then a thought struck her. The last place she might check was the small sleeping alcove off his office. Toni had caught him in there with Christie late one night almost two months before, and that was when she'd been promoted from waitress to singing star. To her credit, she'd actually had some talent, but Toni had never thought she was good enough to sing with the Mountaintops. On top of that, her drug and alcohol abuse would soon destroy the meager abilities she did possess, and then Toni would have to pry her far enough away from Johnny to move her back to waitressing. Assuming, of course, that she'd accept the demotion.

That would be hard enough, and Toni wasn't looking forward to the day when she'd have to fire Christie. The girl with the shapely body and curly blond hair and little else going for her would soon bring trouble down on her brother's head, and the spillover effect would damage the entire operation.

Toni paused in front of her brother's office door and shook her head. If only he'd open himself to her ideas, her methods, her ways of doing business, they could double their net income within a year and make themselves twice as difficult to prosecute. But he'd never go for it. He was locked into Pop's way, and nothing short of brass knuckles or a crowbar would move him away from that course.

Toni opened the door and looked around, and this time she saw her brother's overcoat draped over his chair. She stepped further in and heard sounds from behind the alcove door, sounds she'd heard before.

Great, Toni growled to herself. Christie missed a show to get up close and personal with Johnny. That brainless little —

Toni pushed the door open and blurted out, "All right, Christie, you've missed an entire —"

It wasn't Christie.

A naked blond woman was lying next to Johnny.

And it wasn't Christie.

Her bare-chested brother raised himself on his elbow as the blond yanked the sheet up to her cover her breasts. "Toni! How many times I gotta tell ya not to barge in here! I'm kinda busy right now!"

Toni nodded slowly as she recognized the blond as one of the club's new waitresses, the one who was absent from her assignment. "Uh-huh. Busy."

"Yeah! Now why don't you just leave us alone? We're just gettin' acquainted."

Toni shook her head and finally recalled the blond girl's name. "Linda needs to get back to work. We're full up tonight and I'm sure she could use the tips."

Johnny frowned, but Linda reached out and put her palm on his chest. "It's okay with me, honey. I'll meet you later if you want me to."

Johnny turned to her and smiled. "Sure, sugar. You go back to work for now. We'll talk later."

He leaned down and kissed her sloppily, then turned and glared at his sister. "Well? You wanna watch us get dressed too? Didn't think you were that kinky."

Toni sighed. "I'll forgo that particular pleasure for now. But I need to talk to you, Johnny. I'll be outside."

Toni stepped through the door and closed it, but not before she heard a sharp fleshy smack and a feminine giggle, followed by some whispered conversation. After a more than sufficient

interval, the door opened again and Linda slipped out. She gave Toni a sheepish glance.

Toni returned a full-force angry-boss glare. "Make sure you fix your makeup before you go back on the floor. You look like you've been wrestling an alligator."

The girl dropped her gaze and blushed. "Yes, ma'am, I will." Then she headed out the door. She looked more than a bit unsteady on her feet, although she didn't seem to be drunk.

Maybe she was just overwhelmed by Johnny's masculine charm. Sure she was. And their attorney, the slimy but efficient Martin Snell, would get that Supreme Court appointment any day now.

Johnny took his time getting dressed, either to show Toni that he was still in charge or just to irritate her, but it was slightly over seven minutes more before he opened the door. Toni glared at him and he shrugged his shoulders.

"What? You got a problem with my social life?"

She gritted her teeth. "The last time I found you in there with a woman I had to hire her as a featured singer! Before that, I had to break in a lunchtime piano player who couldn't find a melody with a road map and a GPS unit! What's Linda going to be?"

"Her? Nothin'. She's happy bein' a waitress."

Toni stood and snarled her response into Johnny's face. "Oh, sure she is. Wait until she finds out what we really do here! She'll cuddle up to you and beg for a new wardrobe or a better apartment or a car and you'll drop one wing and run in circles and give her whatever she wants just like you did with Christie!"

It was a mistake. She was too close. Johnny's left hand lashed out in a backhand slap and caught Toni under the chin before she could react. Disoriented, she tumbled over the couch and onto the floor. She landed on her hands and knees and tried to regain her feet to defend herself.

She wasn't quick enough. Johnny grabbed her hair and yanked her head backwards as he put a knee against the middle of her back. "Listen to me!" he hissed in her ear. "You can bring your new ideas to the board, you can show us how to make more money with less risk, but you don't tell me how to live! I do what I want when I want with whoever I want! You got that?"

She reached up to grab his hand and ease the pressure on her spine. "Johnny, please, you're hurting —"

He yanked again and she cried out in pain. "Tell me you got that! Tell me you understand!"

She coughed twice and tried to nod. "Yes! Yes, I understand!"

He pulled her head a little further back for a moment before throwing her face-first on the carpet. He took a breath and started to say something, but then he changed his mind and stood. He turned and opened the office door, then paused with his hand on the doorknob.

"You're my sister. You're family. I won't let anyone else hurt you. But you can't tell me what to do! You ain't Mom." He paused, then added, "And you sure ain't Pop." He took a deep breath, then stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Toni struggled to the couch and felt her jaw. It didn't feel bloody, but it did feel swollen and it was surely reddened by the impact. She got up and staggered to Johnny's desk to search for a tissue or a handkerchief, then remembered the small half-bath in the alcove.

She washed her face and hands in the ancient sink and tried to fix her hair, but her brush and makeup weren't within reach. It was useless. She'd have to go to her own office and try to make herself presentable there.

Clark watched as Linda scooted towards the ladies' dressing room with her purse clutched in her hand. Her clothing was slightly askew and her makeup was smeared. He wondered what that was all about. But he was sure she'd tell him when they met the next morning at the Planet, so he mentally shrugged and went

back to work.

A few minutes later, Toni Taylor came back onto the floor. She greeted a few of the regulars with smiles and smooth talk, but Clark could tell that something was wrong with her. Between schmoozing visits at the tables, she would glance around nervously as if afraid of pursuit. And her face carried more than the usual amount of makeup.

She made her way to the bar and Clark leaned towards her.

“What can I get you, Ms. Taylor?”

She leaned on the bar without looking at him and said,

“Scotch. Single malt. Make it a triple.”

He stopped. “A triple? You sure?”

“Yes!” she snapped. “A triple!”

“Yes, ma’am.” He poured the drink and set it down beside her elbow. She lifted it and downed it in two gulps.

Clark took the empty glass and put it in the bin under the bar.

“Can I get you a sandwich or something, Ms. Taylor?”

“What? Oh, no, no thanks, Charlie.”

He leaned a little closer. “Are you okay? Is there a problem?”

She snorted nervously, then shook her head. “No. Nothing you can help me with. But thanks for asking.” She looked at him and gave him a wary smile. “Shouldn’t you be getting ready for the next set?”

Instead of answering, Clark gently took her chin in his hand and lifted her face slightly. “Who hit you?”

She slapped his hand away. “None of your business! Now go get ready for the next set! The girls are — are going to need you at the sound board.”

He looked into her eyes. “Maybe I can help. If nothing else, at least I can listen.”

She hesitated as if considering his offer, then shook her head. “No. I’m fine. Just get ready for the band.”

Clark nodded slowly. “Yes, ma’am.” He turned away and took off his apron, then started for the sound booth.

He managed to pass Linda as she set drinks on a table. He paused and nodded as if trying to make sure he didn’t run into her. He smiled and whispered, “Do you know what’s going on with Toni Taylor?”

Linda didn’t meet his eyes. “Later,” she hissed. Then she hurried away. She didn’t look hurt, but she did seem to have trouble keeping her balance as she walked.

Clark didn’t know what was going on, but he was sure he wouldn’t like it when he found out. But since she obviously wasn’t going to talk to him now, his only choice was to get back to the sound booth in time for the first tune of the second set.

Inspector William Henderson, Metropolitan Police Department, Homicide Division, both loved his job and hated his job. It wasn’t the process of solving a puzzle that he hated — most murder cases weren’t all that challenging on a mental level — and it wasn’t the satisfaction of seeing the guilty face punishment for their crimes. It was the fact that his job would be as necessary as that of a tailor in a nudist colony if not for the evil and the violence that people so often visited upon each other.

In other words, he hated the fact that the job that fulfilled his life wouldn’t exist if people didn’t kill each other.

He glanced at the leader of the uniformed officers following him and motioned for the young man to come closer. “Look, Jones, we’re going into the Metro Club after closing time, so make sure your guys look around and stay alert. But don’t take any action unless I tell you to, and for crying out loud don’t give out any information.”

The young man frowned. “But don’t we have to tell them why we’re here, sir?”

“No. ‘We’ don’t have to say anything to them. ‘I’ will do all the talking.”

Jones nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“And remember that we’re here to ask questions, not to arrest anyone. We don’t have probable cause or a warrant, so if they tell us to leave, we smile and thank them for their cooperation and walk out the front door.”

Jones frowned again. “Aren’t they gangsters or something?”

Henderson sighed. He’d forgotten how much fun it was to work with rookie uniformed officers. “They are. But we’re not here about that. And we’re not here to do anything but inform them of a suspicious death and ask some questions. Now stay close, but stay behind me and try not to provoke anyone.”

The youth nodded again. “Yes, sir.” He turned and waved to the other two young people in police uniforms. “Stay calm, stay quiet, and just watch. We’re here to learn and to assist the detective. No talking at all. Got it?”

The other two nodded eagerly. Henderson looked at them and noted their wide eyes and stiff posture. Oh, well, he thought, they have to get some real-life experience somehow. He just hoped that three nervous rookie cops were better than one and that nobody got themselves accidentally shot.

Bill fastened his badge on his suit coat pocket and knocked on the Metro Club’s front door. There was no response, so after a moment he knocked harder.

Someone shuffled to the other side of the door and yelled, “We’re closed for the night. Come back tomorrow afternoon. We open at five. Scram, willya?”

Bill knocked again and called out, “Police. We need to talk to the manager of the club.”

A small window at eye-level slid open. “Cops? What is this, a raid? Where’s your warrant?”

He put on a weary smile. “Hello, George. Would you open the door, please?”

The doorman’s face hardened. “Show me your warrant or you ain’t comin’ in!”

Bill leaned closer. “I don’t have a warrant, George. I don’t need one because I’m only here to talk. We’re not here to arrest anyone.”

The eyes in the opening blinked. “Then I don’t have to let you in.”

Bill nodded. “That’s true, you don’t. But that just means that I either wait for everyone to leave and escort certain people to the station for a little chat, or I call in for a search warrant and hold everyone here until we’re finished looking around.” He leaned closer. “Or will you let me in so I can talk to the manager and avoid all that unpleasantness?”

The eyes blinked again. “Wait here. I gotta go get someone.”

Bill nodded and stepped back to wait. The silence stretched on, and apparently Officer Jones couldn’t handle it. “Inspector,” he almost stammered, “are they going to let us in?”

“Do I look like a fortune teller, kid?” Bill regretted snapping at the young man and continued, “I think so, but I don’t know. So we wait.”

“How long? Sir?”

“Until someone comes, or until we’re sure someone isn’t coming.”

“Right.” Jones took a nervous half-step backwards and fiddled with the handcuffs on his equipment belt.

Bill lifted his wrist. Another two minutes, he thought, then we call in for a warrant and hope we can find a sympathetic judge at almost one o’clock in the morning.

Just as his patience neared its end, the door to the club opened and a young woman gestured to the officers. “Come on in, gentlemen. I’m Toni Taylor, the club’s assistant manager. How can I help you?”

Bill led his entourage into the club. “I’m Inspector Bill Henderson, homicide division. We’re here —”

“Homicide?” Toni sighed. “Inspector, I can assure you that no one has recently died on these premises for any reason.”

“That’s good to know, but that’s not why we’re here. Is the band, the Mountaintops, still here?”

Toni frowned in confusion. “Yes, but why? They’re about to leave for their hotel to get some well-earned rest.”

“This won’t take long. I just have a few questions I need to ask them.”

“Sure.” She turned and called out to a tall young man cleaning up near the bar. “Charlie? See if the girls in the band are still here. If they are, tell them the police want to talk to them.” She turned to Henderson and asked, “My office okay?”

He nodded. “If it’s large enough for all of us and all of them, yes.”

“It’s not.” She shook her head and turned to Charlie. “Tell them to meet us in the conference room.” She turned back to the officers. “This way please, gentlemen.”

Ramona pulled on a light windbreaker and glanced at the other two women in the dressing room. They’d spent many nights and early mornings like this one, too many for Ramona’s taste, and it was time they reaped the fruits of their hard work. Connie yawned as she adjusted her sweater. Shamika ran her hand through her short curly hair and blinked with fatigue. Lois and Lucy had dragged themselves into their room as enthusiastically as if they’d been visiting a dentist for a long overdue cleaning. None of them had the energy to continue the conversations they’d begun after the final set, a set which they’d played without Christie.

They were tired and they needed a day off, which was fortunate because their day off was the next day. Ramona sometimes called for rehearsals on such days, but given the group’s state of mind, she decided that they could use the rest instead. There would be no rehearsals on their day off this week.

Ramona decided they’d deal with Christie’s absence tomorrow when their minds were clear. If the lack of response from Johnny was any indication, maybe they wouldn’t have to do much, if anything. Maybe he was as fed up with her unreliability as they were, and if so, maybe he was ready to fire her and let them finish the gig by themselves.

She smiled to herself. I can dream, she mused.

Just then a sharp knock sounded on the door. “It’s Charlie. You ladies decent?”

Connie lifted her head. “No, but come on in anyway, Charlie. Maybe you can lift our spirits with your manly charm. But make it snappy. We’re all wrung out.”

He opened the door. “Ms. Taylor wants all of you to meet her in the conference room. Some cops are with her and they want to talk to you.”

Shamika laughed wearily. “What for? We gettin’ arrested for not paying ASCAP or BMI on time?”

Charlie didn’t smile. “I don’t know what they want, but I think it’s more serious than that.”

Shamika and Connie both moaned in disharmony, but Ramona waved them quiet. “The sooner we get this done the quicker we all get some sleep. Charlie, please go knock on Lois and Lucy’s door and let them know what’s going on.”

“Will do,” he answered.

Connie grabbed Shamika’s shoulders from behind and leaned on her back as the taller woman passed by. “Oh, Shamika, Charlie, somebody,” she moaned dramatically, “please, please carry me. I don’t think I can make it.”

A grin almost creased Charlie’s mouth as he leaned into the room once more. “I think at least a couple of the cops are young and good-looking.”

“Really?” Connie leaped to her feet and called out, “I’ll race you, Ramona! Last one there is a busted pitch pipe!”

>>>> Stormy Weather

Clark opened the door to the conference room and stepped

aside to allow Toni Taylor to enter, followed by the members of the Mountaintops. He watched their faces as they trooped single file into the room and found chairs around the conference table.

Toni looked tired but wary, and instead of sitting she leaned against a wall. He knew that she had more than just a passing acquaintance with the Metropolis police department, and he also knew that the FBI had taken an interest in the club and its activities. He’d noticed the same dirty white van with a dry cleaner’s logo painted on the side parked across the street from the club three times since he’d started his undercover assignment, and the last sighting had made him suspicious. His enhanced vision had revealed two bored men and a bored woman wearing FBI windbreakers operating racks of expensive surveillance equipment and several tape recorders.

Perry had been very interested in Clark’s tip about the FBI investigation, but none of his usual contacts in the Bureau had shed any light on the object of their quest. So Perry had decided to continue the undercover operation at the club, and he’d cautioned both Clark and Linda to be wary of interfering in a Federal investigation. For a moment, Clark wondered how much Toni knew about the surveillance, then decided she either didn’t know or that she was a terrific actress.

Shamika entered next and brought his attention back to the present. She projected an air of detachment, which Clark had already learned was more a defense strategy than her real attitude. She found a chair and slid into it with a show of disinterest.

Connie stumbled in a moment later and looked at the officers at the far end of the room with obvious forced enthusiasm. She looked too tired to flirt seriously with them, but she did find the energy to wink and smile at the uniformed officer close to one wall. The young man seemed startled by her actions, and Connie’s beauty-queen smile grew real for a moment. The moment confirmed Clark’s opinion of her, that she wanted male approval and admiration above almost everything else. Besides the success of the band, of course.

Ramona glanced at him and murmured, “Thanks, Charlie.” Then she stepped cautiously to a seat at the end of the table, as far from the policemen as she could get. She propped her elbows on the table and frowned at the officer who was wearing a slightly rumpled brown suit.

That was Ramona, thought Clark, caring about individuals but still all business. If the Mountaintops were a Fortune 500 company instead of a band, Ramona would slide into the CEO role with little or no change in the way she conducted herself.

Lucy stumbled past him as if she were running on empty. She didn’t appear to look at the strange men in the room before she plopped down between Connie and an empty chair. Something had been taken from Lucy in the last two nights, and he wasn’t sure she’d recover any time soon.

Lois stopped in the doorway beside him and he inhaled her scent. She smelled good to him despite the lingering odor of two two-hour sets cranking out the tunes for an enthusiastic crowd. And as always, her gaze took in the entire scene before she deigned to enter the room.

He held the door open with one arm extended, and Lois’ hand drifted towards his as if drawn by some magnetic force. As their fingers touched, both of them jerked with surprise, and she turned to face him with a rueful smile. “Sorry, Charlie.” Her smile widened and she leaned closer. “Good thing you’re not a tuna.”

It took him a moment to recall the old Chicken of the Sea commercials, where Charlie the Tuna kept trying to get caught by the company’s fishermen by showing good taste, only to be denied because they only wanted tunas that tasted good. He smiled back. “Good thing you’re not trying to catch me.”

Lois chuckled. “You’re quick with the quips, too,” she said as she walked to her chair. Even as tired as she obviously was, she never let her guard down. Her wary attitude reminded him of

those interesting shorthand pages she'd been working on. Was it possible that she was more than just a beautiful musician?

One with a beautiful heartbeat?

Toni Taylor derailed his train of thought when she turned to face him. "Thank you, Charlie. You can go on home now, unless you have something else to clean up first."

The officer in the brown suit called out, "Wait. Is this guy with the band?"

An opposing chorus of "Yes" and "No" came from several different people. The officer sighed and said, "Sir, are you a part of the band?"

"No, I'm not," replied Clark.

Before anyone else could speak, Lois surprised them all. "Yes, he is. He's our sound tech. He's not on stage with us, but he's as important to the group as any one of us."

Connie turned to Lois and gave her a double-eyebrow wiggle, then said, "Yeah, Charlie can stay as far as I'm concerned."

Brown Suit asked, "Do you know Christie Baldwin, sir?"

Clark frowned at him. "Only as a singer in the club. I've mixed sound for her and the other musicians several times."

"Then you can stay. Ms. Taylor, I think you should be here too."

Toni shrugged and closed the door behind her, then sat in the nearest empty chair. "What is this about, Inspector? It's late and we're all pretty tired."

"I know. I'll try to make this as brief as I can." He ran his hand through his short salt-and-pepper hair and looked at the floor, then back at the group in front of him. Clark thought he looked like someone who wished he were almost anywhere else but here, and not just because of the late hour.

He took a deep breath and straightened up. "I'm Detective Inspector William Henderson of the Metropolis PD. This afternoon at about five-thirty, two young ladies in the third grade went to an apartment a few blocks from here to sell some candy. They knocked on the front door, and when it swung open, the mother of one of the girls peeked in and rushed the girls away, then called us. A woman was lying dead in the front room of the apartment."

Even Shamika had been drawn into the story. Connie burst out, "So who was it and why are you telling us about her?"

"Because the dead woman has been identified as Leanne Petrosky."

All the women in the room, plus Clark, looked around at each other and shrugged, shook their heads, or both. Ramona finally offered, "That's a shame for her, Detective, but I don't think any of us know her."

Henderson nodded. "That's because you knew her by her stage name, Christie Baldwin."

Shamika slapped the table twice and shouted, "Two to one drugs over the booze!" Lucy gasped, then closed her eyes and let her breath out slowly. Toni rolled her eyes and muttered something about Johnny not wasting any time. Lois and Connie were stunned into silence, but Ramona called out, "Detective! What did she die of?"

Henderson fixed Ramona with a cold stare. "Murder."

Jaws dropped all around the table. Shamika gasped out, "Murder? Really?" Toni leaped to her feet and shouted, "What! Are you sure? When? Who did it?" Ramona tried to ask, "Why are we here now?" Connie stood and thrust her chair back against the wall and demanded to know how Christie had been killed. Lucy wrapped both hands around her chair arms and cried out, "No! No! No!" Then she fell silent.

Everyone else reacted loudly, Clark noticed, except Lois Lane. The first thing she did was to grab her sister's elbow and lean over to whisper to her. Clark couldn't hear what she was saying because of the noise level in the room, but he did see Lucy turn her pale face to her sister and jerk her head in a 'no' motion.

Henderson raised his hands for silence. "Please. Ladies, please calm down! Quiet down, please." He waited as his audience settled back into their chairs. "I'm sorry to break it to you like this, but I didn't want you to read about it in the paper tomorrow or hear about it on the news. I understand that Christie had been having some trouble with the other members of the band. Is that right?"

A cacophony of responses began, but Ramona slapped the table and stood. "Mountaintops! Everybody quiet down. Let me answer."

Toni broke in. "No, Ramona. Don't say a word to this guy without a lawyer present."

Henderson sighed. "Ms. Taylor, I'm not accusing anyone of anything. I just want to get a feel for the victim's last few days. We might be able to find out who killed her if we —"

"No!" Toni stepped forward and slashed the air with her hand. "No more questions, not here and not now! You want to talk to these women, you either arrest someone or you wait until they can get legal representation!"

"You sure about that?" asked the weary detective.

"Very," replied Toni.

Henderson sighed again. "Okay. In that case, someone will be at your hotel tomorrow morning with a material witness subpoena for each of you, and a very special one for you at your place, Ms. Taylor. Good night, ladies."

"Subpoena?" "What is this, harassment?" "Jack-booted storm-trooper!"

At that last comment — from Shamika — Henderson lifted one foot and pointed at his shoe. "Standard police issue loafers, sixty-seven-ninety-five plus tax. And for the pair, too, not each one." He put his foot down. "I'll try not to wake any of you up too early."

He led the silent uniformed officers out of the room. As Clark was about to close the door, Toni whispered, "Charlie! Watch them and make sure they leave."

Clark opened the door again and leaned out. He saw the four policemen leave the club and watched the night man lock the door behind them. He turned and closed the door. "George let them out. They're gone now."

Toni took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Look, you ladies need a lawyer. Do not — I repeat, do not — talk to the police without a lawyer present. I guarantee you that you'll make a mistake and say something they want to hear and they'll clobber you for it."

Lois crossed her arms and leaned back. "Sounds like you have some experience with this kind of thing, Toni."

Toni frowned at her. "I have enough experience with the police to know how to stay out of trouble. And whoever killed Christie has dropped a boatload of trouble in all of our laps." She stopped and touched gazes with each of the women in the band. "I sure hope none of you know anything about this."

Ramona said, "Hey! Don't start that, okay? None of us killed her!" She turned to the other band members. "Right?"

All four of them shook their heads and replied in the negative. "See, Toni? We're in the clear."

Toni's gaze narrowed. "And that means what?"

"Nothing! It means that none of us did anything to Christie! That's all I meant!"

Interesting, thought Clark. Ramona seems to know something about the real business run out of the Metro Club. Though how she could have played here for almost a month and not known might have been even more suspicious. And Lois had almost implied that Toni was a mobster herself. Also very interesting.

Toni lifted her hands and waved them in front of herself. "Okay, fine, whatever! Nobody knows anything! Now all of us need to get some rest before those process servers show up in the morning."

Toni turned and strode out the door. Ramona shrugged and said, "I guess this meeting is officially adjourned. Good night, ladies. And get as much sleep as you can."

Clark was almost halfway home when he heard suspicious noises on the next block. When he checked them out, he found a burglary under way, so he slipped into his Silent Vigilante clothes and bundled them up for the police. On a whim, he tied one of the thieves to a pole and hung a sign on him which read "Courtesy of your friendly neighborhood Silent Vigilante — Please check the security video."

By the time he considered that the sign might not be such a good idea, the police had responded to the silent alarm. So he decided to salvage what he could from the situation and write up the incident for Perry.

Instead of going home, Clark went directly to his desk at the Planet. First he wrote up the Vigilante story, knowing that Perry would be less unhappy if he had an actual article in his ink-stained hands. Then he typed up what he knew and what he suspected about Christie's murder, then retyped the information as if it were a story. He considered calling Linda in to help him, but after her odd behavior the night before he decided that she needed her rest more than he needed her help.

He saved the file on his local hard drive and leaned back in his chair. The story wasn't nearly ready for publication. He needed to talk to the police, try to get some hard information from the medical examiner's office, and see if he could wrangle someone to interview the Mountaintops for him. After all, he and Linda were still under cover.

He wondered how closely the murder was connected to the mob activities at the Metro Club. His first impression was that Toni Taylor hadn't known about it before Henderson had made his announcement, but maybe she was a better actor than he thought. Maybe her actions and her well-concealed injuries earlier that evening were related to the murder somehow.

Thinking about Toni brought him around to thinking about the women in the Mountaintops. Perhaps one of them was involved. Maybe one of them had finally had enough of Christie's antics and had permanently ended the relationship. Christie had certainly provoked each of them to some kind of action on several occasions. He decided to review what he knew about each woman and see if he came up with any answers.

Shamika Jones, drummer and occasional guitarist, was the biggest and strongest of the five. She moved with a tightly controlled power both onstage and off, and her hand-eye coordination was excellent. She seemed emotionally detached from others at times, but Clark believed that she was simply reluctant to open herself up to people. She seemed to be committed to the success of the band over her own fame — just as the other four seemed to be — and if Christie were standing in the band's way, Shamika might be motivated to do something about it.

But Clark didn't think she'd killed Christie. Shamika was more likely to loom threateningly over Christie than to knock her around, even out of anger or frustration. Clark had seen Shamika peacefully defuse confrontations on two occasions, one of which involved an overly aggressive admirer who was bothering Connie. Shamika had intimidated the inebriated man into leaving them alone without touching him or even making a fist. In Clark's mental list, Shamika was the least likely suspect among the band members.

Next he considered Connie Vandross, guitarist and vocalist. Connie was the glamour girl of the band, the one most likely to be featured in a video close-up with her eyes mysteriously shifting from one side to the other. None of the women were unattractive, but Connie was by far the sexiest and most beautiful from a magazine cover point of view. If they were ever on the

cover of Rolling Stone, the photographer would surely put Connie and her shoulder-length blond hair and her high cheekbones in front.

And Christie had been close to Connie in the Miss Universe contestant category. Her beauty had obviously been one of the reasons Johnny Taylor had taken up with her. And when Christie was singing to the audience, her visual appeal shot straight past the stage lights.

But Connie didn't seem to be jealous of Christie on that level. Connie's dislike of Christie had been based on the dead woman's behavior and substance abuse, at least as far as Clark had observed. Not once had Connie made any kind of catty remark about Christie in Clark's hearing. And she'd had any number of opportunities. If Connie had killed Christie for anything other than self-defense, Clark would be very surprised.

What about Ramona? The keyboardist had been deeply insulted the night before by Christie's behavior and insistence on having Lucy play for her show-stopping solo rather than Ramona. As business manager, Ramona knew to the dollar how valuable the Mountaintops were to the Metro Club and how many patrons they'd brought in. Clark had asked the other bartenders about Christie, and they had all said that she'd been okay, but that the Mountaintops were at least twice as good. Their musicianship and their stage presence had eclipsed Christie Baldwin's by a large margin. They also said that Christie was an asset to the band when she stayed within the arrangements, but that she had made a habit of trying to take over set closers and song endings after the first few shows. Ramona had been overheard complaining about the potential damage done to the band's reputation by the singer's antics more than once.

But was that a motivation to kill someone? To some, perhaps, but Ramona had impressed Clark as being as level-headed and in control as anyone he'd ever met. He'd watched her keep the women in the band in line without coming across as demanding or heavy-handed, yet they'd done things together that he didn't believe they would have done on their own, and they'd done them because Ramona had asked them to and then had pitched in and carried more than her share of the load. Like Connie, Ramona didn't seem to be a good candidate to be the guilty party.

What about Lucy Lane? She was the youngest and most volatile member of the group, and she'd been the most upset when Christie had sabotaged the band on stage. She had been the one who'd protested most vehemently to Toni and the other musicians about the singer's excesses and lapses. The word among the wait staff was that Lucy had attached herself to Christie when the band had first arrived and had seemed to almost idolize her, but that starry-eyed view had quickly collapsed as Christie had fallen further under the influence of drugs and alcohol. It appeared that Lucy had fixated on Christie as a maternal figure, a replacement for her own mother whom Lucy believed had failed her, and then when Christie had proven to be all too human, Lucy had experienced yet another major disappointment. Any police psychologist could make that a motive for murder.

Yet Clark couldn't see her deliberately killing Christie. If Lucy had smashed her guitar over Christie's head onstage — or even offstage after one of those infuriating diva moments — Clark would not have been too surprised. But Lucy didn't seem to be the type to kill someone deliberately. In a moment of hot anger, yes, but he couldn't see her planning a murder and carrying it out. She wasn't that cold-blooded.

That left her sister. Lois Lane was smart and determined and supremely talented as a musician, yet there was something lurking under the surface of her musician role, something that Clark hadn't yet identified. He had seen her angry but never out of control. He had seen her laughing and playing on stage with the other women in the band, obviously having a terrific time, but

she'd never seemed to Clark to let everything go, to release herself fully to the moment. It was as if she had something to hide, some secret that burdened her. If any of the women in the band had deliberately killed Christie Baldwin, Lois Lane was probably the one best able to plan such an act and carry it out.

But it didn't fit what he knew about her personally. From the gossip among the wait staff, he knew about her stepfather, the man Lois and Lucy called Randy the Dandy and how the man supposedly had some loose ties to organized crime. But he also knew that both Lois and Lucy had rejected any business relationship with either their stepfather or his associates, with the exception of financial support while they'd been in high school and then two years of college for Lois and one for Lucy. He also knew that Lois hated what her mother had done by marrying into the mob and then drinking herself into a boozy haze almost as much as Lucy did, and that her distaste for her mother's lifestyle was based on principles, not on personalities. Lois knew that a criminal act didn't take place in a vacuum, that it always affected both the criminal and those around him or her. And her dedication to both her sister and to her career would stop her from taking that step.

The act didn't fit Lois. Clark couldn't see her planning such a crime without the greatest of provocation, and unless there was something huge that had escaped his attention, it was most unlikely that Lois had murdered Christie.

And if none of the Mountaintops had killed her — who had? And why?

He shook his head and closed down his computer. He wouldn't solve this case by sitting at his desk. A little sleep was just what the doctor would order if there were a doctor around, and his apartment was a far better place to do that than his desk at the Planet.

>>>> Born To Be Wild

Toni went home but didn't go to sleep right away. She placed a call to the office of an attorney she'd used on several previous occasions. When the voicemail picked up, she said, "Mr. Snell, this is Toni Taylor. One of the club's employees was murdered in her apartment yesterday. Please call me at the club no later than ten o'clock this morning. I assume that the standard fee will apply. Thanks."

She broke the connection and leaned forward on her dining room table. Martin Snell could tie up any trial in a blizzard of paperwork long enough to — how did he put it? — yes, to "readjust the facts" to benefit his client. She hoped he was available tomorrow and not meeting with that new client he'd mentioned briefly that one time. Toni had asked about that new client indirectly more than once, but Snell had always deflected such inquiries by claiming attorney-client privilege. He'd also mentioned once that if he had any new clients — which he was neither confirming nor denying — he wouldn't mention the Metro Club in casual conversation with them unless Toni or Johnny had explicitly authorized him to do so. Toni wouldn't do such a thing, and she hoped Johnny was smart enough —

The thought of Johnny stopped her cold. He'd been acting odd for a couple of days, especially about Christie. And he'd taken up with a new girlfriend before Christie had been banished back to drink hustler, even before they'd learned that she was dead. Could Johnny possibly have anything to do with —

She thrust the notion away from her with both hands. No! He couldn't have done anything so stupid as to kill his girlfriend! That wasn't Johnny's way. He'd eventually get tired of a woman and send her on her way with a few hundred dollars in her purse and a promise to call her — a promise which he never kept.

But Johnny's relationship with Christie had been different almost from the start. He'd never set a girlfriend up in a fancy apartment before. He'd never knocked himself out pushing her to

be a musical star at the club before. He'd gotten them jobs, yes, but Christie was the first one he'd hired a whole band for. The Mountaintops could have played in any number of places in and around Metropolis for several weeks, but Johnny had paid a premium fee to get them to appear for six consecutive weeks. And then he'd paid more to entice them to be the backup band to Christie. Surely he wouldn't kill her, not when she seemed to be finally settling in as a singer.

The reports Toni had received about her rendition of "Fever" were that she'd been nothing short of amazing, that it was the best song she'd ever sung on the Metro Club's stage. Toni had missed it for a conference call with some associates in Las Vegas over some reciprocal business arrangements, but everyone from the club staff said that the crowd had loved it. Even Charlie King had said that it was the best he'd heard her sing.

It had to be something else, someone else. Maybe someone was trying to get to Johnny. Maybe it was a jealousy thing — Linda! Of course! She could throw suspicion on Linda the naked waitress. That was it! She'd killed Christie in a fight over Johnny! That had to be it! And even if it wasn't, she could make it look that way to the police.

That was the tack she'd suggest to Snell when they met, to point to Linda as the real guilty party. It didn't matter whether or not she'd ever spoken directly to Christie. Snell could make her look like Charles Manson's murder mentor. His exorbitant fee would be more than worth it if he could divert the attention of the police and the district attorney in some other direction, any direction away from the club and away from Johnny.

And away from her.

She poured herself a drink and wondered again who Snell's mysterious other major client might be. She mentally flipped through the short list of names of the high-profile crooks in Metropolis — without false modesty, she included herself on that list — and came up with one name which felt right to her.

Lex Luthor.

She was one of the very few outside Luthor's organization who knew about his criminal enterprises. And since she'd stumbled on that knowledge by accident and had never let anyone suspect what she knew, she was fairly certain Luthor was not aware of her knowledge. The philanthropic face he showed to the world was quite convincing. Toni believed that he would now have complete control of Earth's entire space program if not for the first appearance of the man the tabloids were calling the Silent Vigilante. Whoever the man in black was, he'd yanked that bomb out of the shuttle at the last moment and thrown it out of range just before liftoff. And no one had been able to explain how the man had accomplished that feat, not to mention how he'd known about the bomb in the first place.

Toni was certain that Luthor had planted the bomb through his very scary associate Nigel St. John. The tall, distinguished, icy man had appeared at Lex Luthor's side about three years before and seemed to be connected to him by an invisible umbilical cord. Toni had grown up around men who would murder another person at the word of a mob boss, but none of them had ever frightened her. Nigel frightened her. And because he served his employer faithfully, Luthor also frightened her. Even more, the fact that almost no one else in the state suspected he was a criminal frightened her. He could have her killed with little or no fear that her death would lead back to him.

She downed the last of the scotch and considered another, then decided against it. She'd need her wits about her when she spoke with Snell later that morning, and she couldn't risk any hint of hangover if she could arrange a face-to-face with him.

That thought made her hand rise to her mouth and feel the bruise Johnny had given her earlier. Her scalp was still tender where he'd yanked her up by the hair, too. Some over-the-counter pain medication and judicial application of make-up would hide

the damage.

But Johnny had crossed a line with those blows. If he was involved in Christie's death somehow, Toni vowed that he'd be the one to pay the price. His way — Pop's way — was the way to prison or even death, and if he wanted to walk that path Toni was willing to let him.

But he'd walk it alone. She was through picking up after him.

Lois made sure Lucy went to bed and went to sleep. Then she took the phone directory into the bathroom and began looking for a lawyer. She knew that any shyster Toni dug up would be dirtier than a newborn's diaper, and she didn't want a mob lawyer representing any of them in what might turn out to be a murder trial.

She ignored the quarter-page and larger ads touting the legal services and specialties of one lawyer or another. She needed someone who was honest and had no mob ties at all, someone who would fight for the truth instead of just defending a client.

Lois knew she hadn't killed Christie, and she was just as sure that none of the other women in the band had killed her. Lucy was hiding something from them, but murder wasn't it. Lucy was too emotional to have killed anyone and hidden it. If she had killed Christie, she would have told Lois right away.

They had to have their own lawyer. Her contact from Gotham, Vicky Vale, had mentioned an honest lawyer in Metropolis about a year before in one of their rare phone conversations, and Lois was scanning the names while trying to remember it. The woman's last name had been Howard, or Huntzinger, something starting with an 'h' —

Hunter! Connie Hunter. That was the name, and there was her phone number. And there was no splashy ad in the Yellow Pages about Ms. Hunter promising to get her clients off scot-free from DUI charges, excessive tickets, back child support, or anything else. To Lois, that was a big plus. It meant that she wasn't overly successful, which meant she was probably not 'connected' like whatever sleazeball Toni was sure to come up with would be.

Lois jotted down the number on her notepad and sighed. Maybe Connie Hunter could help them. Maybe she'd be in her office at nine-thirty, when Lois' bedside alarm clock would go off after a very short night of sleep.

Lois groaned to herself and changed for bed. The triple burden of watching out for her baby sister, playing for the Mountaintops and doing most of the vocal arrangements, all while moonlighting as Wanda Detroit was taking its toll on her. In the past two years and a few months, her stories had contributed to at least fifteen mob bosses or high-ranking gangsters being charged with major crimes and six presumably 'honest' politicians suffering the loss of their elected offices. Two of those had been arraigned on criminal charges, and the other four were currently under investigation. Nineteen crooked police officers in Gotham City alone had been fired or were under investigation by Internal Affairs. The FBI had arrested five major players in Las Vegas, two in Atlantic City, and three in Central City. And two corrupt state-appointed judges in Florida had lost their seats because of her work.

It was a good score by any measure. Maybe it was time to give Wanda an extended vacation. Lois surely needed the break. She was almost twenty-seven years old and she wasn't getting any younger. Yes, it was time for her to give herself some time for herself.

As soon as this murder case was resolved. There was no way she'd let a talent-poor junkie like Christie Baldwin stop the Mountaintops, whether dead or alive.

She slid under the covers and let out a long sigh, then fluffed her pillow and closed her eyes. Her usual go-to-sleep technique was to think about something involved with the band, something pleasant and fulfilling. Instead of notes on a page or a memory

from a previous set, however, her mind was suddenly filled with an image of a tall, handsome, bespectacled, very fit young man sitting behind the sound board.

Who, according to Ramona and Connie, was most assuredly not gay.

Their hands had touched just a short time ago, quite by accident, but the contact had startled Lois in a way she'd never felt before. For a moment, there had been only Lois and Charlie in the room. She'd momentarily forgotten about the other members of the Mountaintops, about Christie and all the trouble she'd brought to the band, about the meeting with the police they had been about to enter. All else had faded to nothingness. And when she'd looked into Charlie's eyes, she'd felt as if she were seeing right down into his soul.

It was a beautiful soul, so beautiful that it took an act of will to tear her gaze away. And when she had pulled her eyes away, she'd felt a sense of loss that she couldn't explain.

She wondered what portion of her feelings about him was accurate and what portion was due to exhaustion and stress. And she wondered if he'd felt anything in return.

She didn't know if she hoped he'd felt anything or not. That was exactly the kind of complication she didn't need. Besides, relationships with traveling musicians rarely lasted. Lois wasn't about to leave the group, and there was no way Charlie could go with them or follow them. She had living examples in both Ramona and Connie, both of whom had seen relationships crumble under the burden of the road. She'd lost too much sleep sitting up with them to have any illusions of that sort left in her mind.

She tried to push his face away from her mind, but he smiled and refused to leave, even when she all but begged him to. He did, at least, step back and allow her to go to sleep.

And when she finally drifted away to the land of Nod, he filled her dreams with softness and security and comfort and contented smiles.

As she changed clothes and got ready for bed in her apartment, Linda didn't know whether to be excited or frightened. On the one hand, she was close to getting hard evidence to use against the Metro gang, which would improve her standing in Perry's eyes and put her that much closer to an award nomination. On the other hand, what she was about to do was highly illegal and dangerous, and she wasn't sure the police would look the other way when they found out what she was doing, despite her reasons for doing it.

And she had no idea how Clark would react. Would he understand her need to prove herself? Would he respect her more after she'd shown how willing she was to get the story no matter what the danger? Would he be angry at her for exposing herself to peril, or would he be thankful that she'd gotten away with it?

That, of course, assumed she would get away with it.

The wild card in all of this wasn't Johnny. Linda knew what he'd do if he found out that his new 'girlfriend' was an undercover reporter. She'd be dead, no question about it. If Johnny wasn't in police custody when her real identity became known, he'd have her killed. It didn't matter what kind of sweet nothings he'd whispered in her ear the night before. He might do it himself, he might tell George, the sweet-looking but lethal night doorman, to do it, or he might have one of his many henchmen do it. Any way he decided, she'd die.

No, the real wild card was Toni Taylor. Toni was trying to shift the gang's emphasis from rough and tumble to the genteel and respectable. She was trying to change the gang's image from down and dirty to upstanding and clean. And she might be able to do it, too, if Johnny were out of the way.

That thought gave her pause. If Toni could get Johnny out of the way, she could take over and reshape the gang in her own

image. And if Linda were tied too closely to Johnny, she might go under with him. Toni cared nothing for Linda's well-being, except where it intersected with her goals. If Linda could help Toni, Toni would be nice to Linda.

And if Toni could use Linda to take down Johnny, she probably wouldn't think twice about it. Linda hoped her alibi for the time when Christie was killed would hold up under scrutiny.

Christie's murder had scrambled the lines of power at the club and in the gang. Linda had allowed Johnny to seduce her before she'd known that Christie was dead, thinking that Johnny would either show Christie the door right away or let her leave when the band did. If Johnny didn't break it off with Christie, then Linda would be able to play them against each other for her own multiple advantages. Either way, Linda would have the inside track on the gang's real business transactions.

But Christie was dead and Linda had little or no leverage to use on Johnny. Her options had been reduced to two — either play along as the grateful new girlfriend or leave now with the job unfinished. And she had to complete the job. Clark would never respect a girlfriend who didn't finish what she started.

She was committed, and she had to see it through, no matter what.

>>>> All Of Me

Lois' alarm had barely sounded when her hand flew over and tapped the snooze button. She swung her feet to the floor and switched the alarm off, then checked to make sure Lucy was still asleep. Sure enough, her sister hadn't budged, nor had her breathing altered. Lois could make her calls in private.

She looked into the bathroom mirror and saw a stressed but surprisingly rested and alert woman staring back at her. As a working musician, she was used to late nights and late mornings, but today she was up and ready to go hours before she'd normally reluctantly arise.

A fragment of a partly remembered dream floated up to the surface. It was Charlie, looking deep into her eyes and saying, "I won't let them hurt you. I'll never let them hurt you." She couldn't remember what he was supposed to be protecting her from, but she remembered the feeling that he'd do what he'd promised. And she remembered that she'd felt safe within her dream world with dream-Charlie.

She rolled her eyes at herself. Adolescent fantasies about beautiful dark-haired boys with soulful chocolate eyes riding in on white chargers to save the day were Lucy's province, not hers — at least, they had been Lucy's when they'd been much younger and far more innocent. And she had more important things to do this morning than sit and dream about some guy, even if she'd obviously already been dreaming about him. Even if he had the most innocent, electric smile she'd ever seen on any guy.

She took a moment and remembered his eyes as she'd paused in the doorway to the conference room at the Metro Club. They'd bored down into her and left her shaken for a moment. He had been deep, he had been complex, he had been sensitive, he had —

He'd been scanning the room just as she had been.

The sudden realization wiped the soft smile from her face. Since his first day at the club, Charlie had seemed a little too good to be true. He was always on time — a rarity among either bartenders or sound techs — he always had a smile on his face, he was unfailingly nice to the customers and his coworkers alike, and he saw everything.

That was it. That was what had been bothering her about him.

Charlie saw everything. He was far too intelligent and attentive to be just a land-locked sailor, despite his stories to the contrary. His hands weren't soft by any means, but neither were they the weather-roughened hands of a common sailor who'd spent months on a tramp steamer. And his open and trusting face

didn't belong on a freighter or in the Metro Club. He was always alert, always watching and listening. Charlie King wasn't who he said he was.

In many ways, he was just like her. He was playing at being one thing while being another thing altogether. But what was the 'thing' he really was? Who was he really? Was he part of another gang? Was he a spy for the 'Boss' Lois had heard wisps of rumors about from her various sources over the past few months? Or was he from some law enforcement agency? Was she about to be swept up in a racketeering investigation of someone else's doing?

She'd have to put those questions aside. There was this little matter of legal representation over Christie's murder to deal with. She picked up the phone in the bathroom and dialed Connie Hunter's number, hoping for a live person to talk to instead of an answering machine.

As she waited, she thought that maybe Charlie was involved in Christie's death flitted through her mind. While it was possible, she didn't think he was a murderer. He didn't have the hard emotional shell she'd observed in every other sane killer she'd ever met. And he certainly didn't act like he was the least bit crazy.

"Hunter and Winters legal firm. This is Connie Hunter speaking. May I help you?"

The response startled her for a moment. "What? Oh. Right, I called you. Sorry. Listen, my name is Lois Lane and I'm with a band called the Mountaintops and we're playing an extended gig at the Metro Club here in Metropolis and the singer we were hired to play behind got herself murdered yesterday — no, wait, the day before yesterday, and the police want to talk to us about it and we need an honest lawyer and —"

"Wait a minute! Can you slow down a little, you know, take a breath or two?"

Lois grinned. "Sorry. Anyway, we need a lawyer. Are you available to help us?"

The woman on the other end of the call hesitated for a moment, then asked, "What made you decide to call this number?"

Lois weighed the risk of giving away another contact, then decided it was worth it. "Vicky Vale of Gotham City recommended you to me."

"Oh? How's Vicky doing these days? Still painting those still lifes?"

Lois frowned. "I don't know anything about her being a painter. The last time I talked to her, she owned her own photography studio and was doing fairly well."

A chuckle came over the line. "Please forgive me, Ms. Lane. That was a bit of a test to see if you really knew her. We crusaders for justice have to stick together, you know."

Crusaders for justice? What was that supposed to mean? Had Vicky told this woman anything about her? Were they working together in some way? Did this lawyer know about Wanda Detroit? Was Vicky involved in something that might get Lois in trouble?

"Ms. Lane? Are you still there?"

"What? Oh. Yes, I'm sorry. I was just wondering why you needed to be sure that I actually knew Vicky."

"Sorry, I can't tell you that. Attorney-client privilege and all. Now, can you tell me once again why you need an attorney?"

"Sure. What do you know about the murder of Christie Baldwin?"

"Just what little I've heard on the radio. The morning newspaper only had a brief article on her, no real information. Not that the police have released anything, either. Why do you ask?"

"Because Christie was the front singer at the Metro Club and our band was hired to back her up. She didn't show up for work

last night, and after the club closed a police inspector told us that she'd been murdered. He also told us that he wanted to talk to each of us about what we knew about Christie."

"I see." The line went silent, and Lois got the impression that the other woman was chewing on either her finger or the phone line in thought. "Ms. Lane, I personally don't take criminal cases. My specialty is civil law and entertainment law. I represent a number of artists based in Metropolis. Doesn't pay much, but it's clean work."

"I see. Do you know anyone who is a criminal lawyer?"

"Yes. My partner Angela Winters practices criminal law. If you like, I can arrange a meeting with her for, say, one o'clock this afternoon?"

"That's fine unless we get arrested first. Can she help us then?"

"Unless the police have hard evidence linking one or more of you to the crime — say, how many people are in this band?"

"Since you do entertainment law, I'm a little hurt that you haven't come to listen to us play."

Connie laughed. "Sorry. The Metro Club isn't one of my usual night spots."

"Too bad, you're missing a great show. There are five of us. Myself, my sister Lucy, Ramona Wilcox, who's the band's manager, Connie Vandross, and Shamika Jones. Just so you'll know this, I didn't do it, and I seriously doubt that any of the others did."

"Let's not get into that right now since I'm not going to be representing you in this matter. I'll talk it over with Angela. If she can't make it at one, what would be a good time for you ladies?"

"Today is Thursday, so just about any time this afternoon would work. We don't play on Thursday nights and we don't have a rehearsal today."

"Very well. I'll try to call you back in about two hours."

Lois sighed. "That's probably about how long it's going to take me to talk the other girls in the band into this."

Clark heard Perry's approach before the editor sailed into Clark's field of vision with his right index finger upraised and his scowl crowding the world's record. "Kent!"

"Yes, Chief?"

"Do you know what happened last night?"

Clark lifted the sheets of paper in his left hand. "Do you mean the latest appearance of the Silent Vigilante —" he lifted the pages in his right hand — "or the murder of the singer at the Metro Club?"

Perry stopped in his tracks. Had the situation not been so serious, Clark might have laughed. Instead he handed both printouts to his boss. "Here's the hard copy for each story. And the electronic copies of both stories are already in your e-mail inbox. I'm ready to meet with Linda on the latest developments in the undercover operation."

Perry accepted both stacks of paper, then frowned. "Linda's not here. I figured you two would be coming in together this morning."

Clark's eyebrows rose. "She's not here? But she wasn't at her apartment either. Maybe we just crossed paths along the way."

"I hope so." Perry glanced through the article on Christie's murder, then turned and bellowed, "Olsen! Get some background info on the Metro Club for Kent here. This piece needs some punching up. And try to get more on — um — Leanne Petrosky. That was the victim's real name. Check with Kent for the correct spelling. I want to run with the complete murder story in tomorrow morning's edition."

The young man broke into a trot as he called out, "On it, Chief!"

Without acknowledging Jimmy's call, Perry turned and said, "Clark, you go back over this and double-check everything in it.

And the same goes for anything you put in between now and the time we go to press with it. We've already reported the fact of the murder, but if we print a follow-up story with one word that can't be proven true six ways from Tuesday, the gang's lawyers will tie us up like the copyrights for some of Elvis's biggest hits, at least the ones he wrote. You know, they never have resolved all those questions about who actually —"

Clark smiled wanly and patted Perry's upper arms. "That's fascinating, Chief, but I need to get to work. Oh, do you plan to run that Silent Vigilante story in the evening edition?"

Perry glanced at it. "Give me a quick overview."

"Sure. A pair of crooks broke into an electronics store on Twelfth and Wilson last night and were carrying out televisions and DVD players still in the boxes. The Vigilante let the air out of their tires while they were inside the store and called the police. Both guys heard the sirens and tried to drive off until they realized their tires were flat. Then they tried to run, but the Vigilante wrapped them up with TV cable and left them tied to the streetlight they'd broken to hide their activities. They're under arrest and the owner of the store got all his stuff back, minus a broken door."

"Uh-huh. And how did you stumble onto this story?"

"I was walking home from the club when I heard the sirens, so I decided to check it out. I got there as the police were untying the crooks."

"And why did the police arrest these guys?"

Clark unsuccessfully tried to hide his grin. "The Vigilante had left a note around their necks advising the police to check the security video tapes before letting the men go. They went in the store, turned on a TV and a VCR, and played the tape."

Perry sighed. "That's a nice story. Did you happen to get a look at the Vigilante?" Clark shook his head in the negative. "Any clear shots of him on the security tape?"

Clark shook his head again. "Nothing usable. He kept to the edges of the camera coverage and didn't turn his face to any of them."

"How about a description of him from the crooks?"

"They said he was probably Caucasian, a bit over six feet tall and wore black jeans, long-sleeved black shirt, black sneakers, and a black ski mask. And he was very strong and very quick and didn't say a word."

Perry threw his hands in the air. "Great! That's just about what we already have! We can't keep printing 'we don't know what he looks like' every other day! And if he's going to start tying up burglars with cutsie little signs like some wanna-be Spiderman, he might as well hire a press agent!"

Perry's words struck a chord in Clark's mind. Press agent — the notion of doing the Vigilante things more publicly appealed to him. As Perry continued to rant about not having any pictures of the mystery man, Clark realized that he didn't want to leave Metropolis as he had so many other places around the world. Before, when people would begin talking about a man who could do things no other man could do, or about an angel or a "harbinger of the Force" (as he'd been called once in Asia) helping people and disappearing without saying anything, he'd make a discreet exit.

But not here. In Metropolis, he'd found a place where he could belong, a job where he could make a difference not just on the sly, but out in the open, as himself. Reporting for the Planet was a dream come true on several levels. It wasn't perfect, of course, but it was far better than anything else he'd ever experienced.

Then he noticed one of the few imperfections in an open elevator. "Perry?"

"What is it, Kent?"

"I think Linda just came in."

"Finally! You two are supposed to compare notes by nine-

thirty every morning and she's half an hour late! Well, get to work! This investigation won't write itself up!"

"On it, Chief!" Clark turned and trotted across the newsroom to the elevator where Linda had just appeared. But something was wrong. Her eyes wouldn't focus on him and her steps were unsure. He needed to find out what was going on, and the middle of the newsroom wasn't the place to do that.

Clark grabbed her arm and tugged her down the ramp and towards the conference room. "Linda! Glad you're here. What kind of background do you have on Christie Baldwin's murder? Is anyone at the club really happy that she's dead? Is anyone acting scared or like they have something to hide? What are they saying about her back in the locker room?"

He managed to talk over her obvious shock at his mention of the murdered woman and steered her past Perry quickly enough that he didn't stop them. Clark shut the door to the conference room and pulled the blinds shut before he spoke.

He turned to her and lowered his voice. "All right, Linda, let's have it. Where were you this morning? And don't tell me you were at home. I went by your apartment to pick you up and you weren't there."

She refused to make eye contact. "I was out."

"Out where?"

She shook her head and refused to answer. "Okay," he said. "Why are you still wearing the clothes you wore to the club yesterday afternoon?"

She took a shuddering breath, but didn't respond. "Linda?" He tapped her on the shoulder. "Come on, Linda, talk to me."

He crossed his arms and waited for a few seconds, but she still didn't say anything else. "Okay. You were out and couldn't get home to change clothes. Fine." He sat down at the table and gestured for her to follow suit. "What do you know about Christie Baldwin's murder?"

"Nothing. I don't know anything about it. I didn't even know she was dead until you told me just now."

He frowned. Something was wrong with Linda. She was definitely not her normal flirty self. In fact, she looked guilty about something.

"Linda? Look at me." She stared at the table until he gently lifted her chin with his fingertips. "Linda? What's the matter?"

She blinked and sniffed. "I — I think I've been really stupid, Clark."

Keeping his voice low and gentle, he asked, "Can you tell me about it? Maybe it's not as bad as you think it is."

"No. It's at least as bad as I think it is."

"Okay. Then why don't you tell me about it? Maybe I can help you."

She pulled away and turned her head. In a low, stuttering voice, she said, "I — I went in early yesterday, right after we talked, just to look over the place. I didn't expect anyone to be there, not anyone important, but — but Johnny Taylor was sitting in his office with the door open."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "He — he looked so sad. I asked him if there was anything I could do for him. He said, 'Yeah. Come in here and sit with me for a minute.' So I did."

Linda stopped and wiped her nose with her hand. Clark pulled out his handkerchief and offered it to her. She glanced at him and tried to grin, but couldn't.

She blew her nose twice. "I listened while he griped about Christie, how she was out of control everywhere, how she wanted to leave him and start singing in other places, and how she expected him to help her get started. And he had this — this bottle with him. I don't know what was in it, but it tasted so good when he offered it to me — and then he gave me some more and — and then he kissed me and I don't remember much after that until — until Toni came in and found us — found us —"

She burst into tears and couldn't finish. Clark put his arm around her shoulders and tugged her towards him and let her soak his shirt.

She cried and hiccupped and sobbed for several minutes while Clark thought furiously. If Johnny had drugged and seduced Linda, it might be a way to bring him to justice — except Johnny's knowing Linda's real identity might put her in danger. On the other hand, Linda's actions, whether intentional or not, had compromised the investigation itself. If she were involved with one of the principals in the investigation, it could seriously damage the paper's credibility and cast doubt on the validity of any evidence they could turn up.

He waited for Linda to calm down a bit, then asked, "Where were you last night?"

She sat up and tried to find a dry spot on Clark's handkerchief, then said, "I went to — to a cheap motel downtown. I didn't want Johnny to f—follow me home."

He nodded. "Did he follow you?"

"No. At least I don't think so." She turned her tear-tracked face to him. "Clark, what have I done? I c-can't be involved with a gangster like Johnny! I can't go back to the club! What will Perry say? What am I going to do?"

He let out a long sigh. "If what you've told me is accurate —"

"Oh, it is, it is, I swear it! He drugged me somehow!"

"Okay. Then we need to tell Perry about this. He'll have to make the decision on how to handle this."

She turned away again and nodded. He stood and stepped towards the door, but Linda called to him. "Clark?"

She sounds so defeated, he thought. "Yes, Linda?"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I — I know I've pretty much destroyed anything we might have had together. And I know it was my fault."

Several thoughts flitted through his mind as she paused, thoughts about how self-deluded about him she still was, but he didn't voice any of them.

"I know I've been a pest," she continued. "And I know that — that you don't look at me like a man looks at a woman. I mean, you're always courteous, except when I'm putting a lot of pressure on you, and you've never — never told me to just g-go away and leave you alone even though I know you — you've thought it." She looked up at him. "I guess — I just wanted to say — thank you for being my friend. And I hope that someday — we can be friends again."

He took a deep breath. "I hope so too, Linda."

Perry knew Clark was at his door before the young man knocked. "What is it, Kent?"

"We — um — we have a situation here, Chief. We need your input on it."

"What is it?"

Clark shook his head. "Not here, Perry, in the conference room."

A dozen possibilities lunged through Perry's mind, but he forced himself to remain calm and seemingly in control. "Okay, let's go."

Grim-faced, Clark led the way across the news floor. Perry reflected that the young man had grown in confidence and ability since he'd been with the Planet. It hadn't been so many months ago that a meek and mild youth with a teenage idol haircut had appeared in his doorway carrying a profile of an old theater which had been scheduled for demolition. And within the theater story, Clark had embedded a heartfelt tribute to the unsung and mostly forgotten actors and directors and stage hands and ticket takers and technicians who had brought so many plays to life for so many people.

The story had induced Perry to take his wife to a local stage

production, then to talk some shop with some of the cast members afterwards, then to go to a late night get-together at an all-night coffee shop, and finally to help reorganize the board of directors, of which he was now a member. Perry, to his great surprise, had loved it. And Alice had loved it, too. Their shared enthusiasm had helped draw them closer together.

Clark had the ability to entice people to do things they'd do on their own if they would only think about them. It was a rare quality in a journalist, and one that Perry didn't believe Clark knew that he had. He wished the young man would be a bit more aggressive at times, and maybe the Metro Club investigation would generate some more aggressiveness in him, but Clark was a gem of a find. Perry knew he'd been lucky.

And pairing Clark with fellow newbie "Lucky" Linda King had been a very good move. Linda was excellent at ferreting out leads, but she didn't always know what to do with them. Clark wasn't the best at finding those leads — although he'd improved a lot in that area — but he was outstanding in developing them. Their combined talents produced usable stories on a regular basis, and lately the stories had been better. Some had even been banner-worthy, and he dared to believe that the Metro club investigation would produce the pair's best written work to date. Sometimes it was better to be lucky than good.

But as he closed the conference room door behind him, he realized that Linda hadn't been lucky today. Something was seriously wrong.

Perry sat down in a chair across from Linda and folded his hands together. "Linda, Clark, can you tell me what's going on here?"

Clark looked at Linda, who waved weakly at Clark and said, "You — you tell him."

"Are you sure, Linda?"

She nodded and pushed a damp handkerchief against her nose and mouth.

Clark sighed. "Okay, here it is. Last night, Linda was — well, I guess the best way to say it is that she was drugged and seduced by Johnny Taylor." He paused, looked at Perry, then continued. "I don't think Linda had much choice in the matter, Chief. From what she's said, she doesn't remember much about what happened, except that she woke up in bed with Johnny."

Perry took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Is that true, Linda?"

She nodded without looking at him. "Yes."

He sat back and shook his head. "Well." He looked at the young woman silently weeping across the table. He looked at her partner, who sat close to her but who was offering no comfort at the moment. Perry wondered if Clark had any idea how to comfort a woman who'd been date-raped, which was pretty much what had apparently happened to Linda. He knew he didn't.

Perry leaned forward again. "Linda, you do understand that I have to take you off this investigation effective immediately, don't you?" She nodded. "And for your own sake, you have to call the police so you can report this."

She looked directly at him for the first time. "Yes," she said softly. "I know. I — I'll cooperate fully. I'll even file charges if that's what you want me to do."

Perry shook his head. "No, Linda. I'm not going to tell you what to do about anything legal you want to do. In fact, I have to tell you that because you suffered this trauma during an authorized investigation, the Planet is at least partly liable for what happened to you."

She frowned. "What? No! It's not the Planet's fault! Or your fault! It was —"

He lifted his hands to stop her. "Wait a minute. You need to talk to an attorney before you go making any statements about whose fault it was. You can engage one on your own, you can talk to someone in our legal department, or I can recommend

someone. It's completely up to you."

Linda frowned again, this time in thought. "Who do you recommend?"

"I'll get the number from my Rolodex. Her name is Connie Hunter and I think she can help you."

Lois knocked on the door to her bandmates' hotel room, knowing that they probably weren't all awake yet. She had a little over two hours to get them on board with the meeting with the lawyer she'd found, and of the three of them only Ramona was anything close to a morning person.

She heard a thump from the other side of the door, then a single bloodshot eye peeked through the slit of the doorframe as it opened to the length of the burglar retainer. "Wha'yawant?" she muttered.

"Connie, it's Lois."

Connie blinked and tried to focus. "Who?"

Lois sighed. "Lois Lane, your world-class bass player and top challenger for the most beautiful woman in the band. Is Ramona up yet?"

The face slid away from the crack. "Mona!"

"What?"

"Loizeere."

If not for the circumstances, it would have been funny. Connie's inability to process mornings was legendary in the band, even predating the Lane sisters' involvement. Ramona had, out of necessity, learned to comprehend Connie's morning speech, so in a moment Ramona's conscious face replaced Connie's barely animate one.

The door closed for a moment, then opened wider than before. "Morning, Lois. Kinda early, isn't it?"

"I got us a lawyer."

Ramona frowned and rubbed her unbrushed hair. "I thought Toni was going to find one for us."

"Uh-huh. Do you want an attorney who knows the Metro Club inside and out to represent us? And, most especially, one that the district attorney knows is mobbed up?"

"Huh." Ramona frowned. "Hadn't thought of that. Glad you did. What time do we meet and where is it?"

"One o'clock. I have the address. It's close enough to walk if we want to."

"I don't want to. We can afford a cab. Say, is Lucy on board with this?"

"She'll do what I want her to do. She might not like it, especially not at first, but she'll play ball." Lois waved her hand at the door. "What about the other two?"

Ramona rolled her eyes. "Who, Beauty and the Beast? They'll see reason just like I did. None of us want to be held over in any town because of a trial. We don't get paid for that and it's lousy publicity."

A low rumble emerged from beyond the door. "Who you callin' a beast?"

Ramona turned her head and said, "Take it easy, Shamika. I was talking about Connie."

Bedsprings protested as someone moved on a mattress and the growl came again. "Sure you was. You just treatin' me like some po' black trash, just like always."

Ramona put on a bad Southern accent. "Oh, you pore li'l thang! You got yore pore little feelings hurt so bad! Just let little ol' me fetch you a big ol' hunk o' raw meat for yo' breakfast, won'cha?"

Shamika grunted, then growled, "Make it a big one this time. Last one was way too small." She grunted again as she stood. "And quit stealin' Connie's material. She do that Mississippi accent way better."

Lois and Ramona shared a quiet chuckle, then Lois said, "If you can get Connie moving and into the shower, we can all have

breakfast together. I'll go reserve a table in the cafeteria if you want me to."

Ramona nodded. "That's a good idea. Is Lucy up yet?"

"She will be by the time I get back to our room."

Ramona frowned. "I hope your sister appreciates all the wonderful things you do for her." Before Lois could respond, Ramona said, "See you at breakfast in half an hour," and closed the door.

She hopes Lucy appreciates all I do? wondered Lois. What the heck was that supposed to mean?

>>>> It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing

Toni entered the restaurant and was immediately accosted by a perky little waiter who was just thrilled to pieces to guide her to her "lunch date." He even gave her a conspiratorial smile as he promised to bring a menu and the diet soda she'd ordered. He rushed off so quickly that she didn't have a chance to tell him she wasn't eating.

The boy apparently thought she was having an affair with the sleazy man across the table from her. Great, just great. She couldn't get any respect from anybody.

She sighed to herself and turned to face the man across the table from her. "Thank you again for meeting with me on such short notice, Mr. Snell. I'm sorry to interrupt your lunch."

He waved one hand in a circle and smiled widely. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it. I always enjoy the company of a beautiful woman, no matter the circumstances. And please, Toni, call me Martin. I've asked you to do so often enough."

"That you have. All right, Martin, what do you think?"

Snell put his elbows on the table and leaned his chin against the palms of his hands. "I think I'll have a piece of that four-layer chocolate cake for dessert."

"No!" Toni barely restrained herself from shouting. "I meant, what do you think about the case?"

"Oh, the case! Well, unless the police have an eyewitness or two, or unless they turn up some very convincing forensic evidence, I'd say your all-girl band won't miss more than one or two rehearsals, if that."

She exhaled in relief. "Good. Just in case something does come up, may I call you?"

His smile oozed sincerity. "Of course you can call me! I doubt that anything will come up, given that you say the girls are all innocent —"

"They're women, Martin, not girls, and none of them are involved."

"Of course not. The women are all innocent as newborn lambs. Therefore, they have nothing to worry about, at least not related to losing work due to being under arrest for murder." He smiled again. "As I've already said, if they do become entangled with the legal system, you may call on me for any legal assistance necessary. If I'm unavailable for any reason, I know several reliable attorneys on whom you may call."

Toni knew what he meant by 'reliable.' She was surprised to realize how distasteful the word sounded in her mind. "Thank you, Martin."

"You're more than welcome." He motioned to the perky young waiter. "I'd like a piece of this coma-inducing chocolate cake, please, with lots of pecans all over it." He smiled ingratiatingly. "Life is too short to pass up the good stuff."

The waiter smiled sincerely. "Right away, sir. Anything for the lady?"

Snell turned his best believe-me-because-I'm-so-earnest expression to her. "My dear? What do you say? Share with me, or would you prefer your own? Surely you require more sustenance than just a diet soda."

Toni tried not to roll her eyes at him. "No dessert for me, thanks. I have enough excess weight to work off as it is."

Snell eyed her up and down. "Forgive me, Toni, but I don't

see any excess anything on you."

She couldn't take much more of this. "Thank you, Martin, but I really must be going. Just sign the check when it comes. The club will take care of it."

He faked disappointment as well as he faked sincerity. "A business lunch, then? Too bad. Maybe next time we can —"

She stood and dropped her napkin on the table. "We'll have to talk about it next time. I need to get back to my office."

"Of course. See you soon, Toni. Oh, would you tell Johnny that the little matter he asked me to look into has been taken care of?"

She stopped and turned around. "What little matter is that?"

Snell smiled again. "He'll know what you mean. Bye-bye."

Great. Now she was Johnny's personal messenger. Not only that, but it looked like Johnny was doing an end run around the other members of the board again. He was still doing things his way, which was going to get them all in serious trouble one of these days. And Martin Snell, the club's primary attorney, a man who knew that she was trying to change the way the gang did business, was enabling him.

She hoped Snell got a pecan lodged sideways in his throat and had to have an angry heavyweight professional wrestler apply the Heimlich maneuver to save him.

She also hoped that the message for Johnny didn't have anything to do with Christie. Or her murder.

The car slid smoothly to the back door of the Metro Club and purred in place. Toni stepped out of the back seat without thinking about the hard-faced man who opened the door for her. He was just part of the scenery, one of many who faded into the background except when she needed something done, and she dismissed him from her mind as soon as he passed from her line of sight.

She stepped through the executive door of the club and was stunned to see Lex Luthor standing beside the supply room door. She stopped short and looked around for Nigel St. John, another deadly invisible man who was always around when he was needed.

Sure enough, Nigel stood between Luthor and the door to the main hallway with Luthor's overcoat draped stylishly over his left arm. And, as always, his mouth smiled politely but his eyes took in everything around him.

Luthor chuckled as Charlie came out of the supply room carrying a double tray of clean drink tumblers. Apparently the young man had a good sense of humor and didn't mind sharing it with —

Charlie? What was Charlie doing here at this time of the day? He wasn't supposed to be around when they were doing anything he might be a witness to. She liked him, but that didn't mean she trusted him.

Charlie smiled at Luthor, then saw Toni. "Oh, hi, Ms. Taylor," he called out. "Roger called in sick, so I volunteered to help out." He grinned sheepishly. "I'm kinda hoping to make some time-and-a-half. I sure could use it."

Toni relaxed the tiniest bit. "Don't worry, Charlie, the Metro Club takes care of its own."

"Yes, ma'am. Mr. Luthor, sir, if you'll let me slip past you, I'll get these glasses to the wait staff."

"Of course, young man. I make it a policy to stay out of the way of anyone who is trying to make an honest living."

Toni watched Charlie slide into the main room. She also watched Luthor watching him with more than casual interest.

He turned to face her and smiled. "Toni, my dear! I'm so glad you returned before I left. I'd like to ask you a few more questions about the band."

She blinked. "What?"

"The band. The Mountaintops. I'm sorry for just dropping in

like this, but I called earlier and the gentleman who answered the phone said that you had left for a lunch meeting. I hope I haven't caught you at an inconvenient time."

His speech gave her time to compose herself and shift mental gears — and enough time to suspect that such was his purpose. She returned a smile which matched his in apparent sincerity.

"I'm glad you came by. Shall we go to my office?"

"This won't take long. We can complete our discussion right here if that does not inconvenience you."

Her left eyebrow twitched. "Go ahead."

"Thank you. On the evenings when I attended the club to hear the Mountaintops, they performed only established works from various artists and no original songs. Are they strictly a cover band?"

"No, they have quite a few original tunes. You haven't heard them played at the club because Johnny wouldn't let them.

Because he wanted them to back up Christie, he didn't want them diverting any attention from her with anything new."

"Have you heard any of their originals?"

"Four or five. Sometimes they play them at rehearsals and I get to listen in. I'm not a music critic, but I think the songs have some real potential."

He nodded. "That is good to know." He crossed his arms and frowned. "Do you think they would be amenable to any changes in their lineup?"

"Changes? You mean adding someone or subtracting someone?"

"Ah, either one, actually. But I was thinking of reducing the size of the group."

"You'd have to take that up with them, but from what I've seen and heard, I doubt you'd get anywhere with that suggestion."

"Even if it meant a recording contract for most of them?"

"I can't speak for them, Lex, but they've been through a lot together, and I think that splitting them up would be a lot more difficult than you think."

"I see. Well, that is all I needed to ask you. Thank you for your time, Toni."

"You're welcome. Do you want me to tell the band anything?"

This time his eyebrow rose. "I would prefer that you did not relate the content of our conversation, but if the opportunity presents itself, you might let them know that I would like to discuss a business opportunity with them soon."

She nodded. "I'll do that, Lex. I'm sure they'll be excited."

"Thank you, my dear. Nigel, we must be on our way to our next appointment."

Catlike, Nigel flowed away from the wall and draped Lex's coat over the millionaire's shoulders. "Very good, sir. Shall I fetch the car?"

"Please do. We'll talk again soon, Toni."

She repressed a shudder as he dropped a soft continental kiss on the back of her hand. "I'm sure we will, Lex."

She watched Nigel open the door for Lex and step outside to check the area. She didn't see Nigel's signal — a simple nod of the head would have been too obvious for Luthor — but after a moment Lex followed him.

That was odd, thought Toni. Why would Luthor come all the way over the club to ask a few simple questions which could have been answered over the phone? The answer, of course, was that he would not. He'd had some other purpose for his little trip. It wasn't that he was so enamored of the band that he couldn't wait to start managing them. The man was too busy for that.

Toni sighed. Now she was going to worry about the real reason Luthor had come to the club. Just one more thing for her to carry on her shoulders.

She had already turned towards her office when she realized

that she hadn't seen a strange car when she'd arrived. That suggested that Luthor had some very sophisticated communications gear and that he knew what he was doing with it.

If that were true — and it was a pretty safe bet that it was — it might mean that he'd been checking out the club not just as Lex Luthor but as 'The Boss' in Metropolis. And that might mean that he was getting close to making an overt move into the rackets. And if he did that, he'd come up against the Metro Gang. And Toni no longer thought Johnny was the best choice to direct a counter-attack for the gang.

Luthor was pushing her in ways he didn't even realize. She was lucky that he didn't realize it, else he'd fade even further into the background. And if he did that, they might not see him coming at them until it was too late.

He'd given Toni an excuse she'd believe, but Clark's real reason for being there was to protect Linda. She was going to tell Johnny that she couldn't continue in the relationship and that she didn't want anything from him. Since Perry hadn't known how the gangster would react to that news, he'd asked Clark to tag along and act as backup. So far, his services as rescuer hadn't been needed, so he'd shifted his attention to the surprise visitor to the club.

Clark wondered why a busy man like Lex Luthor would come to the Metro Club for any reason except to have dinner and watch the show. His stated reason, that he needed to ask Toni Taylor a few questions about the band, didn't ring anywhere near true. And when Clark had stepped past him, he'd picked up a faint scent of gun oil, the same scent that his father had used the few times he'd needed to clean his shotgun back on the farm.

So in between hauling in trays of clean dishes, he used his special vision to check out both Luthor and his elegant bodyguard. Sure enough, both men were armed with pistols and extra ammunition. He could understand a bodyguard carrying a weapon, but Luthor being armed puzzled him. It didn't make sense. And carrying extra ammunition meant that they were prepared for a prolonged gunfight.

On a whim, he checked out Luthor's limousine as it glided to a halt behind the club. It had bulletproof glass in all the windows, extra armor in the frame, self-sealing gas tanks, military grade self-inflating tires, and heavy-caliber assault rifles with extra ammunition hidden in the side panels where the driver or any of the passengers could get to them at a moment's notice. There was even a fitting for a medium machine gun in the removable rear window, although there was no machine gun in the car at the moment. Why would an honest businessman need to be so heavily armed?

The answer, of course, was that he didn't. Lex Luthor wasn't just a businessman. He had to be involved in the shady side of the Metro Club's dealings. But despite the evidence that Clark and Linda had already given to Perry, Luthor's name was not on the list of contacts they'd compiled. No one had called him except Toni, and as far as they could determine, her conversations with him had concerned only the Mountaintops. Might that mean that they weren't allies but instead were competitors?

He suddenly realized that Linda hadn't come out of Johnny Taylor's office yet. He focused his vision on them for a moment, then relaxed as he saw them sitting calmly at his desk and sharing a drink.

Of course, that was how Linda's troubles had started. Or had it? He hadn't been able to hear what was being said in the office because of the noise level in the club, but Linda didn't appear to be in any distress. Nor was Johnny acting as if he were upset at her for anything. Maybe this was just a good-bye drink.

Or — maybe it wasn't good-bye after all. Maybe Linda hadn't been completely truthful about what had happened

between her and Johnny.

Johnny refilled Linda's tumbler with the bottle from his private stock. "There ya go, doll-face! Bottoms up!" He tossed back the contents of his glass and let out a sigh that was almost a cough. "Man, that's good stuff. Did you know that my Pop started off making gin in his bathtub? It's true! Lotsa guys did it. That's how it got the name 'bathtub gin,' cause so many yahoos were makin' it in the tub. But Pop, he didn't stop there. He branched out into makin' whiskey and rye and even some ale. He made money hand over fist! Course then the government repealed Prohibition in 1933 and he moved into other — businesses."

Linda sipped her drink and listened. If she could get Johnny drunk enough, she might get him to tell her something about the gang's other business interests. There was no way for any night club to make as much money as Johnny was spending, and they were close to finding proof of the source of his seemingly endless river of cash.

And she knew she could fool Johnny into thinking she was just another dumb blond with round heels. She'd convinced Perry and Clark that Johnny had probably drugged her to get her into bed with him, and she'd even gotten past the interview with the policewoman without actually signing a complaint. She'd used the excuse that she wasn't sure that she'd been drugged, that maybe the liquor had just hit her empty stomach and then her brain. The policewoman hadn't liked that thought, but she hadn't pursued the point either. And since neither Clark nor Perry had been in the room at the time, they didn't know what she'd said.

Her only real regret was that she wouldn't be able to pursue Clark as aggressively as she had before, at least not for a while. She could play the 'wronged woman' card and work on his sympathies, and in a few months she'd have him eating out of her hand. Not only would she get the inside dope on the Metro Gang by sleeping with Johnny, she'd garner all kinds of sympathy from Clark for being used so badly.

She refocused on Johnny's face and realized that he was looking at her strangely. "Hey, doll," he said, "were you even listening to me?"

"Sure I was, honey," she giggled. "You were talking about your Pop and his new businesses and how he got rich."

He nodded slowly. Then he leaned forward. "How'd you like to make a whole lot of money? Fast and easy?"

She shrugged. "Sure, I guess so. It ain't dangerous, is it?"

He relaxed into a smile. "Naw. It ain't dangerous. Not as long as you do what I say."

"Okay. How much money are we talking about?"

He refilled his glass again and raised it. "A thousand bucks for two days' work. And you get to fly to Miami. First class."

She bounced in her chair and clapped like a game show contestant. "Oh, I love to fly! When do I leave?"

Not knowing that he was indirectly giving evidence to law enforcement, Johnny opened a drawer and pulled out a small folder. "Here's your ticket. You leave from Metropolis International at seven-thirty tonight. Take just an overnight bag and pack for two days."

"I'll have to bring my makeup kit along, too."

"That's fine. But it's important that you take just the one bag, okay? And it has to be a carry-on bag. You can't check it."

"Okay, sure."

"You leave here now, get your bag packed, and come back to the club by five o'clock. Got that?"

"I got it, Johnny."

"Good." Then he reached in and pulled out a condom in its foil wrapper. "When you get back, this will be full of something you don't wanna know what it is. I'll put it inside you so's you —"

"What? Wait a minute, Johnny, I don't want you to stick something like that in my —"

He slapped the desk with the palm of his hand and stared her down. "Linda. You said you wanted to make some easy money. This is how you do it."

She looked into his hard face and hesitated. This could be a serious problem or a great opportunity, and she'd never expected a break like this so quickly. And now she had a choice to make.

She could stop the process right now and break the story of the Metro Gang smuggling drugs using young women as mules. Or she could tip off the police and let them arrest her and work back to Johnny from her. Or she could go through with it and make the money and get deeper into the gang's operations.

If she backed out now, Johnny wouldn't ever give her any inside information on the gang no matter how long she slept with him. But if she agreed to this, maybe he'd open up to her. And then she'd have a shot at the Kerth — maybe even a Pulitzer.

In the end, it was a no-brainer. She agreed to do it. And she'd count on her luck to keep her safe.

>>>> It Ain't Necessarily So

Ramona sighed as she stepped out of the taxi. "Lois, are you sure this is a good idea?"

Lois stepped back to allow Lucy out of the back seat of the cab. "Am I certain it's the best idea? No. Do I think it's better than using a mob lawyer? Yes. Do we have other options? I'm open to suggestions, but I haven't heard any from the rest of you and I haven't come up with anything either."

Ramona nodded back. "Since you put it that way, I suppose I have to agree. You said their office is on the second floor?"

"That's what the lady told me. Her name is Angela Winters and she specializes in criminal law."

Connie opened the front door of the office building. "Let's hope she gets very bored very quickly."

None of them spoke as they climbed the flight of stairs. Ramona didn't like the fact that Lois seemed to have taken over this situation, but she had to admit that the bassist seemed to be on top of the situation. She'd been right about not using a mobbed-up lawyer, and she acted as if she knew something about the attorney they were meeting.

Every once in a while, Lois would surprise Ramona by doing or saying something that revealed that she knew a lot more than anyone, even her sister, suspected she knew. This was one of those times. Ramona knew that she herself was no dummy, but once again was getting the distinct impression that Lois was a lot smarter than she let on, and that maybe she was a lot smarter than any of the rest of the women in the band. It was a little unsettling, and Ramona wondered what other surprises Lois had in store for them.

A serious thirty-something black woman of medium height wearing a business suit was flipping through the top drawer in a filing cabinet when Ramona opened the office door and stepped in. "Hi," she said. "We're looking for Angela Winters. We have an appointment."

The woman nodded and her honeyed Southern drawl flowed from her lips. "Then you're looking for me. I take it you ladies are the members of the Mountaintops?"

"I'm Ramona Wilcox." Ramona stepped to the side and gestured at the other women in the group in turn. "This is Connie Vandross, Lucy Lane, Shamika Jones, and Lois Lane. Lois is the one who called you this morning."

Angela pushed the drawer closed and nodded at her visitors. "Another Connie!" she smiled. "That's my partner's name. It's good to meet all of you. Let me fill you in on how this needs to work, okay?" She waited as each band member nodded to her.

"Today won't cost you anything. I intend to listen to each of you tell me your story, and then I'll advise you as to your best course of action. If you want to hire me, I can represent all five of you as

a group or any one of you, but I don't think I should represent just part of the group. And if you don't want to hire me at all, no harm and no foul, we all go our separate ways and nobody gets mad. Is that acceptable to you ladies?"

Ramona nodded agreement. She noticed that the attorney made eye contact with each of them individually and waited for each one to agree before she continued. "Who do you want to start with, Angela?"

"You're the band's manager, right, Ramona?" Ramona nodded. "Then let's begin with you. Come into my private office." She turned to the rest of the group. "When Ramona comes back, I don't want you to talk to her about this interview. I don't want any of you remembering something or forgetting to tell me something because you think that's what I want to hear. I need the unvarnished truth from each of you, so it would be best if you didn't discuss the situation among yourselves at all for now. If you get hungry or thirsty, there are some vending machines at the end of the hall on the other side of the stairs where you came up. And the ladies' room is to the left of the vending machines."

Shamika muttered, "What we supposed to talk about if we can't talk about Christie?"

"That's easy," Connie said. "We'll have a nice time discussing religion and politics."

Shamika snorted an almost-laugh. "Yeah, that'll make the time pass quick."

Angela pointed to the table among the chairs and couch in the waiting area. "You could always catch up on your reading. I have the latest out-of-date magazines right there."

Connie gave her a mock frown. "Thanks. My fondest dreams are finally coming true."

Ramona followed Angela and her hint of a smile into the inner office and sat down as the attorney shut the door.

"All right, Ramona, I'm going to be taking some notes, but they're my private notes and no one will see them but me or whoever you retain as your attorney in this matter, assuming you retain anyone. If you don't retain anyone, they go in my private files and stay there. Any questions so far?"

"Not about that."

"Good. Tell me about Christie Baldwin."

"What do you need to know?"

"I need you to tell me about your relationship with the deceased."

Ramona wiggled in the chair. "Deceased. That's — a pretty clinical way to think about Christie."

"She is dead, isn't she? And her murder is the reason you're here now."

"That's true." Ramona sighed. "I liked Christie the first day I met her, but it didn't stick. She wasn't a bad singer, but she didn't have the star quality she needed to front a band or be a successful soloist. But she had potential, could have been a local success, I think. She did have a good rapport with the audience and she could communicate a song to them, pull them in and get them involved with her as she sang. But her drinking and drug use made that particular talent difficult to control. She'd gotten to the point where she was not only unreliable but she was starting to drag us down. More than once we had to shift on the fly to keep her from pulling the whole song down on top of us."

"Understand that I'm not a musician. How difficult is it to do that?"

"The five of us have been together for about a year and a half now, and we've played over three hundred shows, plus rehearsals and sound checks and jam sessions. We can handle someone dropping a chorus or repeating a verse every once in a while — that happens to everybody — but Christie was starting to do more than that. She'd forget words or change keys or take over endings without giving us any kind of cue or even a hint. She drove me

crazy."

Angela scribbled on a notepad. "Did the other members of the band feel the same way about her as you did?"

"They said they did," answered Connie. "None of us really took to her after the first few days. She was a prima donna because of her relationship with the owner of the club, and she thought we were only her backup group, not a real band."

"That bother you much?"

"It bothered me a lot. I've worked hard to be a good guitarist and a good singer, and I don't like it when some oversexed little twit comes in and tries to take over just because the guy she's sleeping with is the one who's paying us."

"Do you get into those situations often?"

"No, not really. Not like this. In fact, we've never had a gig quite like this one."

"What was different about this engagement?"

"Ramona tell us we gonna play all covers and make this waitress sound real good," Shamika growled. "And she say we gonna make some easy money and stay in one place for six weeks and they gonna pay for that and feed us, and we got time to get our bus fixed up, too. We thought we got a record deal back in January last year, but it didn't happen. Did a album on a budget just before Christmas so's we'd have somethin' to sell at our shows, but it ain't took off. Been on the road a lot since then, lots o' travelin' and lots o' sleepin' in the bus and in crummy motels." She shifted in her chair and grunted. "I'm thinkin' maybe we gonna get another shot at a record deal, and we can use the time off the road but still playin' most ever day to stay sharp. Sounded like a sweet gig to me."

Angela wrote a note to herself. "Was it a sweet gig?"

"Started out sweet, but Christie turn out to be just another lush yankin' some rich boyfriend around by the — sorry 'bout that. She leadin' him around by the personals and he do whatever she say for her. She could'a been a pretty good singer if she'd really wanted to be, but she wouldn't listen to nobody. Drank too much and took drugs. Messed up songs, then got to messin' up whole sets."

"Did that make you angry?"

"Course it did! Who wanna come hear a band where the singer keep screwin' up? She takin' money outta all our pockets."

"Didn't you try to talk to her or to the club manager about the situation?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "Every two or three days Ramona would meet with Johnny Taylor and tell him that Christie needed to straighten up. It rarely helped, and never for more than a day. All it really did was make Johnny harder to deal with."

"You felt frustrated?"

"Constantly."

"Did that make you want to do something about it?"

Lois blew out a breath. "We were doing something about it. After that last performance where she laid across the piano like she was selling advertising in her cleavage, we told her we wanted to meet with her and straighten things out with her."

"And that was the night she died?"

"I guess so. That was the last time any of us saw her alive."

"Wasn't there some kind of disturbance after the last set that night?"

"Yes."

Angela waited a moment, then blandly asked, "Would you like to tell me about it?"

"Not really."

"Would you rather tell the police about it? Because they're almost surely going to be asking the same kinds of questions, except they won't be nearly as polite about it as I am. Besides,

you called me, I didn't call you."

Lois shifted in the chair and nodded shortly. "Yeah, you're right, I'm sorry. Okay. Lucy got mad and yelled at Christie and told her she was ruining the gig for all of us. I held her back and wouldn't let her smack Christie, although I really wanted to let her do it."

"But she didn't hit Christie?"

"No. Nobody hit anybody."

"What else happened?"

"Ramona told her that she and Christie and I needed to meet before rehearsal the next day and hash things out. Lucy was in the dressing room by then, and Connie and Shamika were just watching and listening."

"Did Christie agree to this meeting?"

"Yes. And I actually thought we'd finally gotten through to her. I thought she just might straighten up and fly right."

"And that's the last time you saw Christie Baldwin alive?"

"That's the last time I saw or heard from her at all."

"So you were in your dressing room and didn't hear about this meeting then?"

"Not until Lois told me about it. I thought it was a good idea. We had to do something."

"So you didn't see her or talk to her after the band scheduled that meeting?"

Lucy dropped her gaze. "Well — yes. I did."

Angela didn't display any reaction, but had she been a cat her ears would have swiveled forward. "So did you see her or talk to her?"

Lucy sighed. "She left a message on our phone, mine and Lois' at the hotel. But she asked to talk to me. She left her phone number and address and asked me to call or come see her before the meeting the next day."

"What did you do?"

"I left and went to see her that night."

"Why?"

"Because I was tired of all the crap she was pulling and her me-first attitude and I wanted her to get things straight with all of us. I thought that if I talked to her, maybe she'd see the light and start acting like a team member, especially since she'd called me first."

Angela made a note on the pad. "What time did you get to Christie's apartment?"

"Um, I'm not sure, but it was about two in the morning."

"What happened when you went to see her?"

"She let me in and told me the reason she wanted me to play piano for her on 'Fever' that night was because she wanted me to leave the band and be her accompanist."

Angela nodded. "And what did you say to her?"

Lucy leaned forward. "I told her no! I told her I wasn't abandoning my sister and my friends for her! I told her we were going to be successful and she was going to — to —"

Angela smiled and spoke softly. "It's all right, Lucy. Just take your time and tell me what happened."

"Sorry." Lucy took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Okay. I told her she wasn't going anywhere, that she didn't have what it took to be a singer."

"Uh-huh. And then what happened?"

"Then — then I left and went back to the hotel."

"Did you touch anything in the apartment, like a drinking glass or the piano? Did you handle anything there?"

"No. After I — and she stopped talking."

Angela leaned forward. "After you what?" Lucy didn't answer and Angela's smile slipped away. "Lucy, you have to tell me the whole truth now or I can't help you."

Lucy sat back and rubbed her hands together. "I — I slapped her across the face. Just like my stepdad used to do to me." She

started crying. "I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry I hit her! But she just made me so mad! She was so selfish! She didn't care about us, about the band, not even about me! And she said she wanted me to play for her!" She wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "I don't think she really even cared about herself!"

Angela opened a drawer in her desk and pulled out a box of tissues. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Lucy blew her nose and seemed to calm down.

"Lucy, this is very important. Tell me how Christie looked when you left the apartment."

Lucy shrugged. "I don't really remember. She was just standing there in the middle of the living room staring at me. I think I really shocked her when I slapped her."

"What did you slap her with?"

"My hand. What do you — oh, no, no, no! I didn't kill her!"

"No, I don't mean —"

"I didn't kill her! You have to believe me! I didn't kill her!"

Angela stood and walked around the desk. "Easy, Lucy, easy. I do believe you. I don't think you killed her. The news reports say she was struck in the head with a blunt object which fractured her skull, and your hand isn't anywhere near hard enough to do that kind of damage. Now calm down so we can finish up, okay?"

"But I —"

"It's okay, Lucy. I just have to ask a few more questions and we'll be done. Can we do that now?"

Lucy took two quick breaths and nodded shortly. "Yeah — yeah, go ahead."

"Good. Now, how many times did you slap Christie?"

"Just once."

"Did you see any blood on her or on you after you slapped her?"

"No."

"Did you hit her with anything else?"

"What? I told you —"

"Hold it! These are the same questions the police are going to be asking you, and they'll be asking them very soon. By now they'll have Christie's phone records for the past few days. They'll know that she phoned your hotel room and left a message, and they may be able to retrieve it from the automatic message machine. And they may be able to find a witness who saw you leave the hotel or one who saw you in Christie's building." She leaned down close to Lucy's face. "Now tell me the truth. Did you hit Christie Baldwin with anything other than your hand?"

Lucy's eyes bored into Angela's. "No. I did not hit Christie Baldwin with anything other than my hand. And I only hit her that one time and I didn't knock her down."

"And you say that she was alive and well the last time you saw her?"

"She was standing in the middle of her apartment, alive and well." Lucy shook her head. "She wasn't happy, but she was alive."

Angela nodded and moved back to her seat behind the desk, then picked up her pencil and scribbled for several moments before putting the pencil down and looking straight into Lucy's eyes. "Okay, I think I have the whole story. May I tell you what I advise you to do now?"

Lucy nodded and put her hands together in her lap. "Yes, please."

"I advise you to retain me or some other attorney to represent you. Then I advise you to contact the police and tell them that you have some information about the night Christie Baldwin died. Ask them where they want you to go and who they want you to talk to. They'll either transfer you to the homicide detective working the case or ask you to come in to see him. Or her. And you need to tell them that you're bringing in your attorney."

Lucy nodded. "Can I bring my sister too?"

Angela frowned and shook her head. "I don't recommend it. Unless she has some information about that night, they won't want to talk to her, and they definitely won't want her to be in the same room with you."

"But we sleep in the same room in the hotel. She knew when I left and when I came back and what I looked like and acted like. I bet they'll want to hear what she has to say."

Angela leaned back in her chair and rocked a few times, then nodded. "I think you're right, they probably will want to talk to her. But she'll need an attorney of her own. I can't represent you and her both, assuming you want me to represent you."

Lucy pursed her lips in thought and nodded. "I want you to be my lawyer. Can you make that call you were talking about? I'll do whatever you want me to do."

For the first time that morning, Angela smiled openly. "Yes, Lucy. I can make that call for you." Angela picked up the phone and stopped with her finger on the buttons. "Have you told me the truth, Lucy?"

Lucy nodded vigorously. "Yes. All of it."

"Good. In that case, I can pretty much guarantee that you'll be just fine."

>>>> I Fought The Law and The Law Won

Clark couldn't stand waiting for people. He couldn't understand why people were late for anything, much less to work or to important appointments. He'd never been late for a class, from kindergarten to college, and he'd never missed a deadline to turn in a story or been late to meet a publisher or a potential employer.

So he was half-frantic at Linda being late for their afternoon meeting. She was supposed to meet with Johnny Taylor, tell him she was ending their relationship, then get out and get away from him before he did anything she'd regret. But she hadn't come out of Johnny's office, and now Clark's extra shift was over and he had the entire evening off. He'd planned to spend it with Linda, supporting her in whatever choices she made, but he couldn't afford to be seen just hanging around the club.

He decided to wait for her in the alley across the street. Surely she'd be out soon, whatever she was doing. Surely she was smart enough not to drink anything else that Johnny gave her. Surely she —

"Sir, you need to come with us. Please."

Clark spent a brief moment berating himself for not paying attention to his surroundings, then he surrendered to the inevitable and slowly turned around. The rugged-faced older man who'd sneaked up behind him was accompanied by a short but serious-looking stout black woman who stood a few feet behind the man and off to one side. They both wore badges on chains hung around their necks.

"Where am I going?" asked Clark.

The man smiled abruptly and Clark got the momentary impression that his face might break if he pushed the smile too far. "Just step this way, please. We'd like to talk to you for a few minutes."

"Am I under arrest or something?"

"No! No, of course you're not under arrest, sir." The man put his hand on Clark's upper arm and squeezed slightly. "If you'll come with us, we'll explain everything."

Clark realized that this guy wasn't going away, so he nodded and allowed himself to be herded down the alley and around a corner to an adjoining alley. There he saw that same dirty white van that he'd seen before, parked beside a doorway and out of sight from the Metro Club entrance but within easy walking distance. And anyone who peeked around the corner and stayed in the shadows could see the front and side entrances to the club without being seen from the club itself. It was a good place from

which to eavesdrop.

The FBI surveillance team, thought Clark. He looked at the man's badge again and verified the lettering. And now they were going to question him about the Metro Club. They were involved in a Federal investigation.

Terrific. Perry would hit the ceiling and then land right on top of Clark when he came down.

The woman opened the back door of the van and motioned for Clark to enter, so he stepped up and in. The two men inside the van glanced at him once and turned their attention back to their consoles.

The older man with the craggy face motioned to a short bench beside the rear entrance. "Please have a seat, Mr. Kent."

Clark was halfway down when he realized how the man had addressed him. "What did you call me?"

The man's face hardened into something Clark recognized as a 'you-have-no-secrets-from-me' expression. "Your real name is Clark Kent, you're a reporter for the Daily Planet, you and your partner Linda King are currently working under cover at the Metro Club as a bartender and sound tech for the house band. My spies tell me you're pretty good, too."

Clark finished sitting and cocked his head to one side. "Pretty good as a reporter, a bartender, or a sound tech?"

The man smiled, and this time it looked real. "Reporter and sound tech. Bartender, not so much. You make your martinis too dry and you put too much soda in the mixed drinks."

Clark chuckled. "I'll work on that, Mister —"

The man put his hands on his hips. "Just call me Agent Jones."

"I see. So I can't identify you, right?"

Jones' face didn't change. "No. Because my name really is Jones. This lovely young thing — he indicated the tough woman behind him — is Tiffany. The boys in the front are Billy and Mouse." He leaned closer and lowered his voice to a stage whisper. "Don't ask about that last one. He's a little touchy about his nickname, you know, tends to overreact."

"Oh." Clark nodded. "Okay. So why am I here?"

"Partly to keep you from making our subjects nervous. Gangsters don't like people who loiter in the shadows outside their headquarters." Jones waved vaguely in the direction of the two men monitoring the equipment. "We've been staking out the club for a little over two weeks now, and we're close to getting some Federal warrants for these upstanding citizens. We're especially interested in Johnny Taylor and his sister Toni. Care to tell me anything about them?"

Clark took a slow breath and thought furiously. If Jones and his associates had been watching the club for that length of time, they knew more about its operations than he did. And if they thought he was withholding evidence, both he and the Daily Planet could get in to a lot of trouble.

On the other hand, if they didn't have that much and were taking him on a fishing expedition, he didn't want to be their pipeline into the club. After all, he and Linda were still working on the story, even if Perry wanted to pull Linda off the operation.

That reminded him of his erstwhile partner and also gave him a chance to change the direction of the conversation. "Hey, you guys haven't seen Linda lately, have you?"

Jones turned to the front of the van and called out, "Mouse, you track Linda King? Undercover reporter, blond, using the name Linda Wannamaker."

The taller of the two men shifted his headphones. "Yeah. She left in a cab a little before two o'clock, then came back around four-thirty. Left again in a different cab about ten till five."

"What!"

Jones looked at Clark. "Looks like she stood you up, kid." He lifted his hand to forestall any further outburst from Clark. "Hang on, slick. This gal is probably on a courier run for Johnny.

Mouse, you track that cab?”

“Guy dropped his fare off at Metropolis International Airport. She took the evening flight to Miami. Ticket said round trip, coming back on the morning red-eye. Should land about ten-thirty. Paid for by credit card issued to Thomas Smothers.” Mouse snorted. “It’s one of Johnny Taylor’s aliases. He thinks he’s being funny.”

Jones shook his head in obvious mock sadness. “She wouldn’t be the first otherwise honest woman to be corrupted by the Metro Gang.”

Stunned, Clark sat back against the bench. He’d known that Linda was willing to take dumb risks, but this one was huge. She could serve real prison time for whatever she was doing at the moment. And he didn’t think he could help her.

He looked up at Agent Jones. “Do you know what she’s carrying?”

Jones’ eyebrow went up. “I guess that means you don’t already know about it.”

Clark frowned at him. “No. I don’t know what she’s carrying.”

“Didn’t think you did. She’s either carrying a kilo or so of cocaine or heroin, or she’s ferrying some documents one direction or the other, we’re not sure yet. May even be both. But we do know that your girlfriend is in some —”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Figure of speech, kid. The young lady dove head first into some very hot water as of the moment she agreed to carry anything out of the state for Johnny Taylor. That puts her in our crosshairs.”

Clark blew out a long breath. “I kinda figured that part out by myself.”

“Now that that’s settled, what do you want from us?”

“From you? You invited me here, remember?”

“That’s right, I did. You don’t know we have this.” Jones turned to the front again. “Billy, bring me that blue folder beside your left elbow, will you?”

The shorter man stood and silently handed a blue folder to Jones, who glanced inside it and handed it to Clark. “This is a dated photograph of Johnny Taylor coming back to his club the night Christie Baldwin was killed. It was taken with a state-of-the-art night vision camera. Notice the timestamp?”

Clark looked and nodded. “Two-fifty-two am. So?”

“Look at the transcript under the picture.”

Clark began reading. He wasn’t three sentences in when he realized that it was a record of a conference call between Toni Taylor and a mob operation in Miami. They were talking about setting up the contract murder of a woman named Cordelia MacDougal, apparently because she’d given Wanda Detroit some information about the east coast mobs. The man on the Miami end of the line was irritated because Johnny Taylor was supposed to be in on the call but wasn’t. The transcript also listed the time, date, and duration of the call — during the time Christie Baldwin had been killed.

Clark looked up at Jones. “This is explosive stuff. But why are you showing it to me?”

Jones looked pointedly at Tiffany, who stalked to the front of the van and put on a pair of headphones. When she was seated beside Mouse, Jones leaned down and put his hand on Clark’s shoulder. “Kent, did you know that there is no Federal statute against murder?”

“Yeah, but there are Federal laws against planning a contract murder across state lines.”

Jones nodded approvingly. “Very good. You’re right, there are such laws, but we can make our case against the Metros without that particular violation. What we want you to do is sic the Metropolis PD on Johnny Taylor for the murder of Christie Baldwin.”

Clark’s eyebrows rose. “Really? That’s very generous of you.”

“Generous?” Jones smiled woodenly and stood up. “No, not really. We want to get the Metros distracted and tied up fighting a local case so we can sneak up behind them and take them all down with our Federal case.”

“I see. So Johnny didn’t really murder Christie?”

“We can’t prove it, but we think he did, and those two photos and the wiretap transcript are pretty convincing, even if they are circumstantial.”

“Huh? Two photos?”

“Look under the last page of the transcript.”

He did. Sure enough, there was another night-filtered photo of Johnny with the same date as the first one, but with a time of two-twenty-six am. In this one, he was climbing either up or down a fire escape near the street level. The picture had enough detail to identify Johnny’s face, but it was a wide enough shot to show the building address.

It was Christie’s apartment building.

Clark slowly closed the folder. “So he was there that night. He has a history of violence, he had the opportunity, he knew where the victim lived, he had a stormy relationship with her, and he may have had a motive.”

“That’s about the size of it.”

Clark stood. “Thanks for the information, Agent Jones. I assume I can take this folder with me?”

“Sorry, slick, but that’s property of the FBI. I can’t give that to you.”

“What? But you put it in my hand and told me to look at it.”

“I never said you could keep it. Now you just wait here beside this open door in the van while I go make sure Billy and Mouse are behaving themselves with Tiffany up there distracting them.”

Agent Jones stepped forward and left Clark at the back of the van. He leaned over and started talking quietly about the upcoming week’s college football games. After a few seconds, he lifted his head and glanced back at Clark. “You still here, young man? Go home. And be sure and leave that folder here.” Then he leaned down again and resumed his conversation with the other agents.

Clark finally realized that officially Jones couldn’t give him anything, so he was doing it unofficially and with plausible deniability. If his superiors complained about Clark having that evidence, Jones could truthfully claim that he hadn’t given it to Clark, nor had he given his permission for the folder to leave the van. He could just blame the folder’s loss on an enterprising young reporter.

It was time to go. Clark slipped out the back door and jogged to the corner of the alley and the street. As he turned to head towards the Planet, he heard Jones call out, “Oh, drat, that young man has done gone and made off with Federal property. Evidence, even. Tiffany, please go see if you can get that folder back from him.”

“Remember my surgically repaired knee, boss? Can’t move very fast yet.”

“Aw, that’s right. Well, you just do your best, but don’t hurt yourself, okay?”

Clark smothered a laugh. The man was obviously used to doing things his own way. He wondered if Jones ever got out of his supervisor’s doghouse.

He remembered just in time that Agent Jones had tracked Linda to the airport. There was probably an agent or two watching him at that moment, so he had to be sure he didn’t do anything “special” while he was carrying that folder. In fact, he probably would have to watch himself as long as he was undercover at the club. The last thing he needed right now was for someone to find out about his special abilities, particularly

someone in the Federal government.

He hoped that he hadn't already betrayed himself.

He strode onto the newsroom floor in hopes that Perry was still there. This information shouldn't wait until morning.

He was standing in the doorway to his office. "Chief?" called Clark. "I have something very interesting for you."

Perry turned his head and finished shrugging into his overcoat. "Make it quick, Kent. I'm meeting my wife for dinner and I'm not going to be late tonight. I want Alice to be in good mood when we get home."

"Oh, I think you'll want to see this."

Perry grunted and took the folder. Clark watched his boss's eyes open wide and focus as he read the transcript and looked at the pictures. "Is this verified? The dates and times and all?"

"The FBI trusts it. In fact, that's where I got it."

Perry's head jerked up. "You what?"

"Don't worry, Chief, I didn't steal it. Well — not quite, anyway."

Perry sighed. "I don't think I want to know exactly how you didn't quite steal this stuff." He slapped the folder shut. "My next question is, do you want to hold on to this or take it to the police?"

It was Clark's turn to lift his eyebrows. "My choice?" Perry nodded. "Wow. Uh, it would make a great story, yeah, but if we print it all, it might make it impossible to use it as evidence. I'd really hate for Johnny Taylor to get away with this murder because I screwed up, assuming he actually did it."

Perry smiled. "That's what I was hoping you'd say, son. Tell you what, I'll call Bill Henderson and ask him to come here at seven tomorrow morning. Can you be here at that time?"

"Uh — yeah, I'll be here."

Perry frowned. "Why the hesitation? Do you have another appointment, something more important than this?"

"Not — more important, maybe the same importance level."

Perry waited a long moment, then lifted his arm theatrically and made a show of checking his watch. Clark blew out a long breath and said, "Okay, sorry, I know you have someplace to go. But you need to know this, too. The FBI guys who gave — who had this folder also told me that Linda flew to Miami tonight for Johnny Taylor."

Perry's jaw fell open. "She — she did what?"

Clark rushed to tell the rest of it. "They said she was probably carrying documents or drugs or both one way or the other. Johnny has some connection in Miami and he sent Linda to meet him. Or her. And she's supposed to come back on the early morning flight tomorrow."

Perry stood silent in thought for another long moment, then checked his watch again. "What do you think she's doing, Clark? Is she chasing the story, has she really started working for Johnny, or is she just being completely stupid?"

Clark pursed his lips for a moment, then said, "I think she thinks she's gathering evidence for the investigation. And — I know you've known her longer than I have, Perry, but I'm not real sure she told us the whole truth about her little encounter with Johnny Taylor."

Perry shook his head. "I hope you're wrong about that, son, but I can't tell you that you're not right. She's always bent the rules, usually when she didn't have to, but this time she's crossed the line. When this is all over, she and I will have to have a very interesting and informative meeting." He clapped Clark on the shoulder. "But we can't resolve any of that right now. I have a date with my very attractive wife, and you need to get some rest — after you write up everything you've told me."

"Will do, Perry. Uh — about Linda?"

"Yes?"

"If we can finish with Henderson early enough tomorrow

morning, I'd like to meet her at the airport and have a talk with her."

"Gonna give her a piece of your mind, eh, son?"

Clark frowned. "Maybe a few pieces. She seems to have lost hers completely."

>>>> Isn't It Romantic?

Lois had watched Charlie exit the mysterious white van and skitter along the street. She didn't know why he'd been inside a dry cleaner's van, but at the moment it didn't matter. She needed to learn more about him.

She'd almost lost him on Parker Avenue, but she'd guessed that he wasn't heading for his hotel or the club and had picked him up again two blocks later. Her long red wig and large round dark glasses, along with her reversible windbreaker, had helped her to change her appearance sufficiently to allow her to follow him all the way to his destination.

She wondered if Charlie had run track in college. For sure, it was a while since she'd played tennis competitively, and she had a hard time keeping up with him without letting him know she was following him despite the regular workouts she and the other Mountaintops participated in. If he'd done a better job looking behind him he might have spotted her, but she didn't think he had.

He'd nearly gotten away from her, and she was a bit winded. She gladly sat down at the coffee shop across from the Daily Planet with a double latte and waited for a few minutes, then slipped into the restroom and became herself again. The wig was stuffed into her purse, her large dark glasses were exchanged for small wraparound ones, her shoes were swapped from light-colored flats to dark sneakers, and her dark blue windbreaker was turned inside out into a pale yellow one. She even replaced the burgundy outside pocket flap of her handbag with a dark green one held on by Velcro. No one who knew her only casually would pick up the change.

The half-dozen customers who entered and exited covered her change of appearance. She took a different seat by the window with a mocha almond coffee and a cruller to watch the entrance to the newspaper building. She knew Perry White by reputation, and she guessed that Charlie — or whoever he really was — had been working undercover at the club for the paper. Maybe he was supposed to find Wanda Detroit, maybe he was on some other story, but Lois didn't need his interference. If he made one wrong move, it could get them both killed. Maybe she could warn him off without messing up his job too badly. It was worth a try. Maybe if she just let him know that she'd realized that he wasn't who he claimed to be, his boss would call off whatever undercover job he was on.

While she waited, she mulled over Lucy's revelations about her visit to see Christie. After the initial shock had worn off, Lois admitted to herself that Christie could have picked few musicians who would have been more of a boost to her act than Lucy. And Lois believed Lucy's claim that Christie had been alive and upright after Lucy rejected the offer to leave the Mountaintops. Of course, the police had to hear about it too, and Lucy was scheduled to appear in that detective's office — Harriman? no, Henderson — at ten the next morning.

And both Lucy and her attorney, Angela Winters, had been adamant that Lois not accompany them. Lois didn't like it, but she admitted that Angela was right, that Lucy had to see this through on her own. Her own appointment with the police was set for eleven-fifteen the next day. Smart or not, she planned not to bring a lawyer with her. She didn't need anyone looking over her shoulder.

Which reminded her of Ramona's comment that she hoped Lucy appreciated all that Lois did for her. Lois hoped that it was enough and not too much, that she hadn't smothered Lucy by

shielding her from as much of life's jagged edges as she could. Of course, their father's death, their mother's alcoholism, their mob-connected stepfather, and their subsequent strained relationship with Mom and Randy had already cut Lucy deeply. Lois could only try to hold the edges of the wounds together and hope that Lucy would heal on her own. She couldn't protect her sister forever, and she probably shouldn't try. Even if she did know better than Lucy in most things.

She was so deep in her thoughts that she almost missed Charlie coming out of the building across the street. She forced herself to exit the coffee shop slowly and quietly, then guessed that since he was headed in the general direction of the Metro club this time, he would end up in his hotel room. She didn't want to spook him, especially since she now looked more like her normal self.

Her sense of direction and tracking skills in any city qualified her as an urban Calamity Jane. She picked him up not far from the Apollo hotel and watched him disappear into the front door. She slipped into an empty alley and pulled the wig out of her bag again, then settled it in place as best she could and once again reversed her windbreaker.

The fifty-something desk clerk perked up when he saw her and gave her a lascivious smile. "Something I can do for you, Toots?"

She pulled her thin sunglasses down far enough to look him in the eye. "Yeah. Tell me about the guy who just walked in here."

The older man's face fell and he stood away from the desk. "What guy?"

Her shades went back up over her eyes. "Don't be like that, honey. The tall young guy with dark hair and glasses and really big shoulders. What room is he in?"

"You — know that guy?"

She grinned sideways. "Yeah. He's my — my cousin. I wanna surprise him."

"Cousin, huh?" The clerk nodded wearily. "Room threenineteen. Stairs are over there."

She favored him with a grin. "Thanks, honey. Oh, you know, he likes to use all kinds of names to keep the paparazzi away. I'm sure you recognized him. What name is he using here?"

His knowing eyes shifted and Lois knew he'd pegged her as just another prostitute, which was how she wanted him to remember her. "King. Charlie King."

"Yeah, that's him. Thanks, honey."

"No problem, Toots," he replied dryly.

The stairs were wobbly and worn, and Lois felt bare wood under her sneakers more than once. Two people peeked out at her when she reached the third floor, but no one challenged her or called out a greeting.

She knocked sharply on the door to Charlie's room. "Just a minute," he called. No sounds were audible through the cheap door, not even the TV, so she guessed he'd either been reading or writing.

He yanked the door open and said, "It's about time you got — whoa, Miss, I'm sorry, I thought you were someone — else?"

She pushed past him. "I am someone else."

He stood beside the door with his mouth open. "Shut the door, Charlie. We're gonna have a party."

He looked closer at her, then shook his head. "Lois? What are you doing here? And why are you dressed for Halloween?"

She pulled off her shades. "Oh, maybe it's because I'm trying to hide who I really am."

Her eyes pinned his for a long moment, then he pushed the door shut and threw the deadbolt. "I don't know how you found me, but it's obvious we have a lot to talk about."

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. "I'd say so."

He stopped in front of her, then continued past her. "You want something to drink?"

"How about a vodka martini, shaken but not stirred? The ideal drink for a man who's not who he claims to be."

He peeked around the corner of the tiny kitchen. "My, what sharp teeth you have, Little Red Riding Hood."

"That's not the right quote."

"What can I say? I was fairy-tale-deprived as a kid."

The red wig found itself back in her bag, along with her thin shades. "So what's your real name and what do you really do?"

He came back with two glasses of something clear and fizzy. "My name is Michael Corleone and I'm a highly successful Mafia hit man. You're just lucky I'm on sabbatical."

"And you get your assignments from the news desk of the Daily Planet?"

He stopped in his tracks and observed her closely for a few seconds. "You have been a busy little beaver, haven't you?"

She reached out and took one of the glasses. "You need to check for tails more often if you're going to work undercover."

He gave her a medium-wattage smile. "I bow to your superior wisdom on the subject." He sat down in the chair furthest from the door and gestured for her to join him in the other chair. "I suppose you want to know about the real me."

She perched on the arm of the rickety chair and sipped her drink. "As real as it gets. Say, what's in this drink? And don't sing 'Baby, it's cold outside' because it isn't."

He laughed. "It's just 7-Up with ice. No alcohol."

"Good." She took a bigger sip. "And now we're at the end of 'What's My Line?' where the contestants reveal their true names and occupations."

He nodded. "My name is Clark Kent. I'm an investigative reporter for the Daily Planet. My main assignment is to get the goods on the Metro Gang, and my secondary assignment is to locate Wanda Detroit and offer to bring her to safety."

He was looking for Wanda? That could mean any number of things, good or bad. "Any particular reason you're looking for this dame who's named after a car town?"

"My boss thinks she's in serious trouble. The Metro Gang is trying very hard to find her. And we doubt they plan to give her a citizenship award."

She forced a chuckle. "Probably not, knowing them."

She looked around the room but never let Charlie — no, his name was Clark — get out of her peripheral vision. She was about to make a cutting comment on his taste in decorating when he tilted his head and softly said, "You're Wanda, aren't you?"

His soft brown eyes locked with hers and she found herself unable to do anything except admit the truth. "Yes. I'm Wanda Detroit." She forced herself to break eye contact, and for lack of anything better she took a drink. "What tipped you off? I mean, that was a pretty big leap to connect me with Wanda. What did I do?"

He grinned. "When I mentioned Wanda, your body language shifted ever so slightly, like you were getting ready to jump up and run. Your pupils contracted but your voice was as casual as if you were asking about the weather forecast. Oh, and both your heart rate and blood pressure went up."

She frowned. "How could you tell about my blood pressure and heart rate?"

"Your face paled just a little bit and the vein in your neck started jumping faster. The only explanation was that either you knew who Wanda was or that you were her."

She shook the ice in her glass. "That's an impressive piece of deduction."

He nodded and took a sip of his ginger ale. "Thank you. Just to put your mind at ease, it's not something anyone would notice unless he or she were trained to look for stuff like that. I seriously doubt you'd ever give yourself away to the bad guys."

“Thanks. I feel a little better now.”

He leaned back in his chair. “Now that we each know who the other really is, what should we do about it?”

She slid down into the chair and leaned back. “I’m not sure. I won’t tell anyone about you being an undercover reporter. That could get you killed. But what will you do about me? Are you going to tell your boss — your newspaper boss, that is — who I am?”

He shook his head. “Not unless you want me to. Whatever your reasons are for doing what you’re doing, I’m confident that you believe they’re good ones. And as long as you want to be Wanda, I don’t think I’m the one to put a stop to it.” He smiled a high-wattage smile. “Of course, when you do decide to go public, I’d love to be the one with the exclusive.”

She chuckled. “Maybe I’ll mention a young and brave investigative reporter helping me out in my next piece. Anonymously, of course. That kind of angle always boosts sales.”

He smiled wider. “Listen, as long as you’re here, would you like to pool our information and see if we can irritate the Metros a little more?”

Lois leaned forward in the chair. “Now you’re talking my language, Clark. I’d love to take Johnny Taylor down.”

“Good.” He reached around and picked up a pad of paper and a pencil, then smiled when he saw similar implements in Lois’ hands. “Great minds think alike, don’t they?”

“I always carry the tools of my trade with me. If I’m not fighting crime, I’m working on lyrics or arrangements for the band. I’m Lois Lane, musician. Wanda Detroit is what I do, not who I am.”

He tilted his head in thought, then smiled. “I like that. It’s really good. I’m going to remember it for the article when I ‘out’ you.”

This time she laughed aloud. “Okay, Kent, let’s pool our knowledge. I’ve been there longer than you have and I have more notes, but I’m sure you’ve picked up bits and pieces that I don’t have. Where do you want to start?”

He frowned. “I think there’s something going on between Lex Luthor and Toni Taylor, and I don’t mean romantically. I think he’s involved with some other gang. Or maybe he has his own gang. The guy is just too slippery for my taste.”

Lois pushed her jaw back into place. “Lex Luthor is a gangster? Are you sure?”

“No, but from what little I do know I don’t trust him. He’s as crooked as a pretzel somewhere down the line. I just have to find out where.”

“Did you know he’s the guy the band is supposed to meet with about financing our new record deal?”

Clark’s eyes widened. “No, I didn’t. Did you know that he and his bodyguard carry pistols with extra ammunition and that there are assault rifles in his limo?”

“Assault rifles? Are you sure?” Clark nodded. Lois sat back and blew out a long breath. “Wow. We just can’t catch a break.”

“I take it that you’re not going to do business with him?”

“Not my call. It’s up to the whole band. But maybe I can limit his involvement in the long term.”

“That would probably be a good idea. His long-term survival prospects aren’t all that promising.” Clark scribbled on his pad and looked up at her again. “What do you know about Christie Baldwin’s murder?”

“I know I didn’t do it.” Clark rolled his eyes and she added, “And I’m certain that none of the Mountaintops are involved. Beyond that, I don’t have a clue.”

“Then let me put your mind at ease. The best candidate at the moment is Johnny Taylor himself. He was photographed by Federal agents at her apartment building that night at about time she was killed. And he was photographed again coming back to the club later that night — or, morning, actually, a little after

two-thirty. And Toni was recorded talking to some people in Miami who were upset about Johnny missing the call.”

“That’s very interesting. Do the police —”

He suddenly straightened. “Wait! Do you know a woman named Cordelia MacDougal in Miami?”

“Why?”

He jumped to his feet. “You have to warn her that there’s a contract out on her. That conversation the Feds recorded was partly about hiring someone to kill her.”

Lois’ face fell and she spat out a quick curse. “I already told her the Metros were going to try to have her taken care of, but I thought she had more time. I’ll get in touch with her as soon as I can and tell her to hurry up.”

Clark shook his head. “I think the Miami police department will take care of that. My boss has the transcript, and he’s already contacted a reliable detective on the force here. Besides, your article last spring about corruption in both the Dade County and Miami city police departments really shook things up down there.”

She chewed a fingernail for a moment. “I sure hope so. Cordelia’s one of the good gals and I’d hate to see her get hurt. But I’m still going to call her again.”

“If you’ve already warned her, I’m sure she’ll be fine. Let’s go on to something else.”

She took a deep breath. “First let me tell you that I think Wanda is going to disappear for a while. Some of the bad guys are starting to get wise to my contacts. Cordelia is just one of them, but she’s the third one this year who’s had to run and hide to stay safe. And I know they’re getting close to my Gotham City contact, too.”

Clark frowned. “There was a guy from Gotham City in the club a couple of nights ago to see Johnny about something. His name is Matches Malone, and I got the impression that he’s a messenger for someone higher up. Know anything about him?”

“No, but I’ll let my Gotham contact know about him. Maybe there’s some info floating around over there we can use.”

Clark was silent for a long time before Lois asked, “Is there something wrong?”

He sighed deeply. “Yeah. My partner in the investigation seems to have gone off the rails. She’s flying to Miami for Johnny.”

“Sorry to hear that. Who’s your partner?”

“She’s one of the new waitresses. Her name is Linda — Linda Wanamaker.”

Lois’ eyebrows rose. “Really? The blond who wet her pants a few days ago when Johnny shot up the wall in the conference room? His new girlfriend Linda King? That flirty little twit?”

“Yeah, she’s — wait, you know her real last name! How’d you figure that one out?”

“I knew her in college. I deliberately didn’t maintain contact with her.”

Clark’s face settled into a neutral mask. “I guess you won’t be joining her fan club any time soon.”

She ignored his feeble joke. “Clark, that girl is a loose cannon! She’s dangerous! I went to college with her and she almost destroyed the student newspaper with her affair with the editor. She stole some other reporter’s story and claimed it as her own. And she changed schools after she was accused of stealing money from the cafeteria while she was supposed to be doing a story on — oh, what was it? I forget now, but Linda is definitely not who Wanda Detroit would choose as a contact.” She sighed. “I’m just glad she doesn’t seem to remember me.”

He shook his head. “Well, I have to admit that I’m not too surprised. She’s made a habit of cutting corners ever since I met her, although this is the first time she’s done something like this. At least, as far as I know.”

“That’s why I’m so worried about my secret getting out. I’m

starting to run into people from my past who know that I'm more than just a musician. If Linda were to recognize me, there's no telling what she might tell Johnny."

"I doubt she'd turn you over to him."

"She wouldn't have to. All she'd have to say is 'Hey, Johnny, I remember the bass player in the band from college several years ago and she's kind of a stickler for right and wrong.' Johnny Taylor would have me whacked so fast it would make your head spin."

Clark opened his mouth but no sound came out. "You know I'm right," Lois insisted.

He shrugged. "I can't tell you that you're wrong. Why don't we focus on what we know instead of on what might happen?"

She nodded. "I think that's a good idea. I'll give you a copy of my notes on the meeting the gang management had a few days ago." She snickered. "They're not doing so well at the moment."

"And that's partly your doing?"

"I'd like to think so." She inclined her head towards him. "You go next."

He leaned back in his chair. "Actually, I'd like to ask you a personal question."

"Okay," she replied. "But I reserve the right to decline to answer."

"Fair enough." He moved forward in the chair and looked directly into her eyes. "This is a dangerous and difficult thing you're doing, even though it's certainly worthwhile. But it can't be easy. Why are you doing what you're doing? Why are you being Wanda Detroit, trying to take down the mob?"

She gasped. That was the last thing she'd expected him to ask. She opened her mouth to tell him that it was none of his business, that it wasn't anything he needed to know.

Instead the truth came out.

"My father was a doctor. He was working for a company doing research on enhanced prostheses — computer-controlled lifelike artificial arms, hands, legs, feet, that kind of thing. One day my mom got a visit from the state police and a company official. They said my dad had been in an accident in his lab, that one of his experimental machines had fallen on him and killed him. I didn't believe it, so I did some poking around on my own, and I found a reporter who agreed with me. She told me that she thought the company was a mob front, that my dad had died because he didn't want to go along with what the mob wanted to do with his work, that she was going to write a story that would blow the lid off, and that I needed to act like I believed everything they said until her story went to print.

"The police found her body four days later in the trunk of her car. Her hands had been wrapped up with duct tape and she'd been shot in the head more than once. All her notes were missing."

She stopped and dashed unexpected dampness from her eyes. A soft tissue materialized in her hand and she smiled her thanks to Clark before continuing.

"Of course, there was no story. The company gave us a huge insurance settlement, my mom got involved with Randy Beauchamp and his mob connections and married him and finally crawled into a bottle to escape the disaster her life has become. Randy wanted both Lucy and me to get business degrees and work with him, but that wasn't going to happen in a million years. So we took up music.

"At first it was mainly to assert our independence, to thumb our noses at him, but it got to be way more than that in a hurry. I know I'm good, but Lucy is close to being a genius. She can play just about any style on guitar or keyboards or drums. I think I'm a better singer and arranger than she is, but not by much. We both want the Mountaintops to succeed."

She stopped to take a drink. "But you wanted to know about Wanda, didn't you?" Clark nodded but didn't speak. "I invented

her because I saw how pervasive the mobs are. If nobody bought illegal drugs, they wouldn't sell them — which is how they justify it to themselves — but if they weren't out there trying to get everybody's money for those drugs, shoving them in people's faces and daring them to try it just once, there would be a lot less crime, fewer broken lives, and a lot less pain in the world. And fewer kids would have to finish growing up without a father." She looked away. "Lucy deserved better."

Her head snapped around again as she felt Clark's hand on hers. "You deserved better, too," he whispered.

She looked into his eyes again and licked her lips. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess I did."

"And now Wanda Detroit is out to hurt the mobsters like you were hurt?"

Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open. No one had ever put it to her that way, but it rang true. A large part of her reason for inventing Wanda had been to make amends for Lucy's pain, but suddenly she realized that Wanda was trying to make up for Lois' pain also.

It suddenly struck her that there was a fine line between retaliation and retribution, and she was afraid that she'd crossed over it so many times that she'd wiped it out.

She lurched to her feet. "I — it's getting late. I have to be going."

Her progress towards the front door was halted by his gentle touch on her shoulder. "Lois, wait. Please."

She stopped but didn't turn to face him. "What do you want?"

His hand slipped away and she was surprised to feel a chill where the warmth of his hand had been. "I'd like your permission to tell my boss that I think I've found Wanda Detroit, but that I'm not ready to say so for certain, and that I don't know if she's ready to go public. And I'd like to tell him what you've told me about the club and its operations."

She nodded sharply. "Go ahead with all that, fine with me. Anything else?"

His voice betrayed his mild amusement. "You might want to put your hooker disguise back on so the desk clerk doesn't start thinking too hard."

After a moment she grinned. "Good idea. We wouldn't want him to hurt himself." She tossed him a quick smile. "See you tomorrow at rehearsal. Two o'clock sharp."

"I thought Malcolm was going to be back tomorrow. I know he's out of the hospital."

"He is, but the band took a vote at breakfast this morning and we all decided we want you mixing for us. You've got great ears."

He laughed as she slipped her wig on again. "What's so funny, Clark? Does this wig make me look fat or something?"

He laughed again. "No, not at all. I do think you look better without it — a lot better, in fact, and I don't think anything you wore could make you look bad. But I was laughing because no one has ever complimented me by telling me that I have good ears."

Lois' mouth widened of its own accord. "Well, don't get a big head about it, okay?"

As she descended the stairs, still wearing her smile, she thought about all the other parts of him which she considered 'great.' And she didn't see the desk clerk as he followed her out with hungry eyes, nor did she hear his mumbled comment to himself about how easy it was to please some women.

She should have been thinking about rehearsal or Wanda business or making sure she got in touch with Cordelia, but all she could focus on was the fact that he'd said she was beautiful.

Well, not really, but surely that was what he meant!

>>>> That Old Black Magic

Linda was nervous.

No, scratch that. She was way past nervous and headed towards terrified. She was wound up tighter than a bluegrass banjo player on speed.

During the whole trip down to Miami she'd second-guessed her decision. Not only was she extremely uncomfortable with the extra load she carried inside herself, she knew that whatever she was delivering — either nearly pure heroin or nearly pure cocaine — would be used to steal money from people victimized by the mob and ruin their lives in the bargain. There was no way for her to rationalize this, no way to justify her actions on any legal or moral basis.

But if she didn't follow through — if she quit now — she'd die. She was already in too deep. The people she was supposed to meet in Miami might find her and kill her, or they might send her back to Metropolis so Johnny could kill her, but either way she'd be dead. Johnny had confiscated all the cash she'd been carrying save for two twenties and a few coins, and he'd put her credit cards in the same envelope with her money — including the thousand he'd promised her — and locked it in his safe, so running wasn't an option. Calling Perry or Clark collect from Miami wouldn't help, either. There was nothing either of them could do for her now.

Could she contact the police? Sure, but she had no idea who was and who wasn't honest in Miami. Her impression was that things had gotten much better lately, but there were still some dirty cops down there, and the honest ones were still figuring out where all the bodies were buried by their former dishonest brethren. Dialing 9-1-1 in Miami was as dangerous for her as jumping into rush hour traffic in Metropolis.

It appeared that Lucky Linda had finally used up all of her luck.

Her luck was holding in only one way, in that when Johnny had taken her wallet, her Linda Wannamaker driver's license was in the provided clear slot. Had her real license been visible, she would already be feeding the worms in some vacant lot in Suicide Slum.

Before she realized it, the plane began its descent. The pilot thanked them for flying Inter-Coastal Airlines and hoped they all enjoyed their time in Florida. She made her way out the door and into the concourse where she saw an unbelievably tall and immensely broad-shouldered Hispanic man standing beside a short Hispanic man holding a sign which read "Linda W. from Johnny." The shorter man had an expectant smile on his face. The taller man's face might as well have been carved from granite.

She cautiously approached them and asked, "Is one of you Carlito?"

The smaller man smiled. "I am Carlos, *senorita*. Carlito is the name by which I am called by my friends from Metropolis. I assume that you are the lovely Linda whom my good friend Johnny Taylor said was coming to visit us?"

Her gaze flicked to the imposing big man standing impassively behind Carlos, then back. "Yes, I'm Linda."

Carlos' face erupted into a buoyant grin. "Excellent! This is my personal assistant, Juan. Juan, would you please take to the car the luggage of the *senorita*?"

Juan silently reached out and lifted Linda's overnight bag from her shoulder. She'd almost expected him to make a creaking, grinding noise, like a stone statue coming to life, but of course he didn't. In fact, he said nothing, made no sound at all. He did, however, continually sweep the area with his eyes as he led them away from the gate.

Carlos, on the other hand, wouldn't shut up. "May I have the honor to address you by your beautiful first name, Linda? Gracias! You honor me, Linda. I understand that it is late in the evening and that you are surely wearied by your journey, but we have a simple dinner prepared for you in my humble limousine. I

apologize in advance that it will not be sufficient to honor such an important woman as yourself, but regrettably we have not the advantages to which you are accustomed in Metropolis."

Linda halfway tuned him out as he went on in that same vein while they approached the exit door of the terminal. The officer standing to one side locked eyes with Juan but didn't move towards them or say anything. After the trio passed him, the officer reached with purpose into his jacket. Linda was certain he was either writing down her description or calling it in to headquarters as Carlos took her arm with surprising gentleness and guided her to a long dark blue limo waiting beside the curb.

Carlos helped Linda into the back seat and sat beside her. Juan folded himself into the seat facing hers with his eyes focused on the rear window. Linda gave a sigh of relief, both for making it to the car without getting arrested and for getting off her feet. The condom inside her was solid and unyielding and made every move a trial.

Carlos smiled and said, "Linda, we may begin our meal as soon as you have delivered the package sent to us by your Johnny Taylor." He extended his hand. "If you please?"

She blinked. "But — I — I'll need to visit the ladies' room to —"

"You will give it to me now." His smile widened microscopically. "Please."

Linda glanced at Juan, who was now glaring at her impassively. His sculpted features held no human warmth or compassion. If she didn't surrender the package, he might take it from her right there in the car. And he didn't look like he cared what her condition might be after retrieving it.

She shuddered and hunched forward to hike up her skirt. She heard a snapping sound and looked at Carlos, who was pulling on a pair of latex gloves. As she pulled down her underwear, Juan slid a large clear plastic bag from inside his shirt and opened it.

Getting the package out was less painful than it was humiliating. She finally handed it to Carlos, who weighed it with his hands and examined it for damage before nodding to Juan and sliding it into the bag. Juan made the bag disappear into a hidden compartment in the limo as Carlos pulled off his gloves and handed Linda a package of sanitary hand wipes.

"I regret the necessity of this ordeal, *Senorita*," Carlos smiled, "but because this was your first opportunity to assist us, we had to be certain that the package was delivered immediately and in the proper condition. Now that you have established that you may be trusted, such unfortunate things will not be necessary from now on."

She readjusted her clothes, then wiped her hands as clean as she could and stared out the window as suburban Miami whizzed past. Carlos touched her on the arm and asked, "Do you wish to eat now, Linda?"

Without turning from the window, she shook her head 'no.' "Very well," said Carlos. "We will take you to your motel. Please feel free to go to the restaurant attached to the motel or call out for a delivery if you wish. We will take care of the cost. It is the least we can do for you."

She slowly turned to face him and asked, "Just how much is that — package — worth to you?"

Carlos' teeth gleamed as the streetlights cast their shifting shadows through the failing daylight and across the car's interior. "I think that you must ask that question of your friend Johnny."

She nodded. "I think I will."

His eyebrows danced in the dusky half-light. "You are indeed a brave woman. I salute your courage."

Just then the car slowed and pulled into a parking lot. Carlos reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a card key. "Juan will take you to your room, *senorita*. He will call for you tomorrow morning at five o'clock for your return flight. Please be ready, as he has other duties to which he must attend following

your departure.”

She breathed a soft sigh of relief. If they had planned to kill her, it was highly unlikely that they would have put her up for the night. Of course, they probably hadn't planned to do so in any case, but she was still scared of these guys. Just like Johnny Taylor, they played for keeps, but unlike dealing with Johnny she didn't have the leverage of her body to use against them.

Juan guided her to her room with nods and gestures. He opened the door and ushered her in, put her bag on the bed, then checked the room quickly. As he left, he nodded so low that he almost bowed to her.

She locked the door and threw the deadbolt, then she leaned against the door and started to cry. She turned her back to the door and slid to the floor with her hands over her mouth as she tried to muffle her sobs.

It was partly relief that she was still alive, partly fear that she was still at the questionable mercy of the Miami gangsters, and partly disgust at herself for allowing herself to be degraded so. She sat on the floor and wept for her career, her safety, her relationship with Clark, her reputation, and all that she'd thrown away for the sake of a story.

Carlos was wrong. She wasn't brave at all. She was a coward, and she was about to pay the price for her audacity and her idiocy. If Carlos let her live, Johnny might kill her, and if he didn't, she'd still have to face legal penalties for her actions today. She'd maneuvered herself into a certain dead end.

Not only was she a coward, she was terminally stupid.

She lurched to her feet and yanked her clothes off as she turned on the shower to the hottest temperature she could stand. Her skin reddened and her eyes ached under the pounding of the water and she used up all the tiny bars of soap she could find.

But like Lady Macbeth, there was no washing her actions away, no cleansing available to her now. All she could do was to play out the string until she returned to Metropolis. Maybe — just maybe — Perry could help her straighten her life out.

If not — well, she'd cross that bridge when she came to it.

Toni looked up from the computer screen on her desk as her office door opened to reveal her brother's weary face. She thought he looked especially tired.

With the desk between them, she felt safe enough to bait him just a little. “Well, the wandering prince finally deigns to make himself available to his beloved subjects. Where have you been all day?”

“Takin' care of some business,” he muttered. Then he flopped heavily onto one of the chairs in front of her desk.

She saved her work in progress and closed the spreadsheet. “I would have given you this message before, but this is the first time I've seen you since I got it, so here it is. Martin Snell wanted me to tell you that the little matter he was looking into for you has been taken care of.”

Johnny's face scrunched up in thought for a moment, then it relaxed and he nodded. “Oh, yeah, that. Good.”

Hoping to keep the conversation civil, she casually asked, “What was that little matter, anyway?”

“What? Oh, it was one of the waitresses who got careless and got busted on a run to Miami last month. Some eager rookie cop grabbed her before she got on the plane here in Metropolis. Snell got her out on bail and she's headed out west for safekeeping.”

Toni knew she had to tread carefully. “What was she carrying?”

Johnny sighed and looked at the floor. “She had about a kilo of horse on her. One of our pet cops got it out of the evidence locker, so we didn't lose the merchandise. And without the evidence or the girl, they can't tie her back to us. We're in the clear.”

“Johnny?” she asked softly. “I thought we weren't going to

use the waitresses to transport heroin any more. I thought we agreed that it was too dangerous for them and for us.”

“Yeah, well, until we get your new pipeline set up, we gotta do what we gotta do.”

“The money isn't worth the loss of our freedom. Using girls as drug mules just draws attention to us, and we can't afford to be noticed.”

He finally turned his face to her. Once again she was struck by how tired he looked. “I know all that, Sis, but we gotta move that stuff. It don't make us no money sittin' in my office.”

Her eyes widened in alarm. “You have a shipment in your office? Here in the club? Are you — no, Johnny, no! I know we agreed that the stuff would never come into the club! You have to move it somewhere else right now!”

“Relax, Toni, it's gone. I just sent the last batch to Carlos tonight.”

“You — how did you do that?”

He snorted in perverted amusement. “It was an internal transaction.”

Toni closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. “You sent Linda, didn't you? Do you have any idea what would happen if the Feds were to pick her up? She'd sing like a canary and take you down with her.”

“Relax. Carlos has instructions to take her out if she steps out of line. And if she gets whacked, he'll take the rap for it.”

“And what if he decides to send her back anyway? Carlos isn't your friend or my friend, Johnny. He's on his own side and no one else's. He'd turn on you in a heartbeat if he could make money on the deal. Or if he could get his own chestnuts out of the fire. If sending Linda back puts us in the bull's-eye instead of him, he won't hesitate at all.”

Johnny exhaled deeply and seemed to sink in on himself. “Yeah, I know. But this is Linda's first and only time, so I think we'll be okay with it.”

Toni shook her head. “I sure hope so.” She stood and picked up her purse. “Are you staying or going home?”

He glanced at his watch. “I'm leavin'. It's after one. George can lock up.” He rose to his feet with less energy than usual. “I ain't runnin' you off, am I?”

She hid her surprise at his apparent solicitousness towards her. “No. I was about to leave anyway. With the Mountaintops not playing tonight, business was down a bit.”

Johnny frowned. “How far down?”

“About what it has been for the last few Thursday nights. Those ladies are a great draw. We should think about bringing in other bands for extended stays after they're gone.”

“Nah. Without Christie, it don't —” he stopped almost in mid-syllable. Then he shook his head and shuffled towards the door.

He was taking Christie's death hard, thought Toni. Maybe he didn't kill her after all. Maybe he had really cared about her.

It would be something different, she pondered.

Lucy lay awake in her bed and stared through the darkness at the patterns of light on the ceiling. It was a game she'd played with herself when she'd first started traveling overnight with musical groups. She'd watch the lights flicker and make up musical parts in her head to follow the shifting streaks of light. The fun part was that every ceiling was different from every other ceiling, and usually the patterns would change from night to night even if they stayed at the same motel for multiple nights. Occasionally she'd end up in a room where the lights created something close to a fugue, with melody, counterpoint, and harmony, all rotating and spinning around in a symphony of light. The exercise had helped her figure out how to play odd timings and opposing parts, especially on the keyboard. And both the lights themselves and the exercises she put her mind through

were oddly comforting to her.

She let out a long sigh and wasn't surprised to hear Lois turn over in the next bed. "Punky, you need to get to sleep. You'll need a clear head when you talk to the cops in the morning."

"So will you."

"All I have to do is corroborate when you left the hotel and when you came back. You've got the hard part."

"I know." Lucy rolled to face Lois's bed. "I keep thinking about how lost and alone Christie looked when I left. And I wish that I'd never slapped her. Or said all those mean things to her."

"I wish you wouldn't beat yourself up about it. We were going to say a lot of those same things to her the next morning."

"Yeah, but I was the one whose mouth they came out of." She turned over and faced the far wall. "I'm the one who crushed her dreams just before someone crushed her head. And I'm going to remember that for the rest of my life."

"Lucy —"

"Good night, Lois."

Lois didn't answer for several seconds, and Lucy expected her to get up and turn on the light and start yet another lecture on how they were sisters for life and how Lois would protect her and take care of her and that what happened to Christie was in no way Lucy's fault, even the part about telling her she wasn't good enough to make it as a pro singer.

But Lois fooled her. All she said was, "Sleep well, Punky."

After a few minutes, Lois' breathing evened out into her gentle, ladylike almost-snore, and Lucy knew she was asleep. Lois never made that sound when she was awake, and had always insisted that she never snored at all. The argument had enlivened a number of long days traveling from gig to gig.

Either Lois believed that Lucy would have no trouble with the police in the morning or she was resigned to visiting her in the big house every other Sunday. Lucy wondered sleepily if she'd have to wear those huge ugly horizontal black-and-white stripes like the cons in the old prison movies or if she'd be given an orange jumpsuit. She wondered if the prison would have a band or a vocal group she could join. Maybe they could sing spirituals in four-part harmony as they worked the fields year-round for "The Man" under the hot New Troy sun. Or would the warden be called "The Woman" in a women's prison? Maybe Lois could bring the rest of the band to visit her every once in a while.

She drifted off to sleep as the lyrics to "Midnight Special" reverberated gently in her mind.

Clark couldn't sleep. The encounter with Lois had shaken him. If she could spot him, could others at the club do the same? He discounted the FBI; they had technology and manpower on their side that none of the other players had. And they weren't about to blow his cover.

But the danger was still there. Clark especially didn't want the Metros to learn about Linda's role in the undercover operation. He wasn't worried about himself, but she was vulnerable to the gang's usual methods of dealing with spies and other irritants.

And even more so now, since she'd done something so utterly idiotic. There was little he could do to help her now, although he knew he'd try. The only good thing to come out of this part of the operation was that surely she wouldn't be hitting on him constantly now.

Of course, it might be worse if she started crying at the drop of a hat. Reporters didn't wear such things any more.

And "wearing a hat" made him think of a change of clothes, which reminded him of his part-time job as the Silent Vigilante. He lifted his ears to the night and listened, but apparently even the bad guys had an early curfew that night, denying him the distraction of wrapping up a few criminals caught in the act.

He thought about Lois and her nom de plume of Wanda Detroit. It was amazing to him that she'd managed to remain hidden in plain sight for so long, fighting the bad guys while maintaining another identity as a musician.

And she wasn't just pretending, either. He knew quality music when he heard it, and the Mountaintops were better than just good. They could play country. They could wail with the best of them. They could slip the classic cool jazz in and make you smile before you realized what you were smiling at. They could melt your heart with a soft ballad and then hit the 'frappe' button and grind you down with some pretty hard rock. About the only styles they didn't play were bluegrass — they lacked the requisite banjo, fiddle, and mandolin — disco, funk, or classic soul, and Clark was sure that they could play soul if they were backing one of the greats like Wilson Pickett or James Brown. Even the hardest-working man in show business would be impressed by their talent.

He mentally reviewed the things he'd read from Wanda's byline. In just the past few months, she'd spurred a number of investigations which revealed wrongdoing in high places or turned over rocks to force the vermin to flee the light. A number of places were safer and healthier now that Wanda Detroit had revealed the truth about some very bad people. And all the while, she was really a highly talented musician who impersonated Edgar Allan Poe's purloined letter —

And a seemingly brilliant idea forced its way into his mind. Maybe he was going about this helping business the wrong way. Maybe it would be better to go public somehow. After all, he hadn't found anything that could hurt him, and helping people and saving lives in broad daylight was getting harder to avoid. The Silent Vigilante could stop criminals in the act at night when no bystanders were around to witness his actions, but he couldn't help out in daylight or at big fires or traffic accidents or natural disasters. He'd have to look different, act differently, behave differently, but it was possible. After all, a number of the bad guys were doing it. Lex Luthor was doing it. He came across to everyone in the state as a rich entrepreneur with philanthropic tendencies, but he was obviously mixed up in some very dirty dealings. He had almost everyone fooled. If Luthor could do it, so could he. And Clark had a far more noble motive, to help people in trouble and save lives.

This idea was worth thinking about. It was also worth talking over with his parents.

Maybe Lois could give him some tips. After all, she'd been living a double life for the last two or three years.

Ha-ha, he thought. Sure, just tell her what you can do and show her how different you really are. "Look, Lois, I can fly and light fires with my eyes and hear stuff from way far away and freeze things with my breath and nothing can hurt me. Let's be friends!"

Wouldn't that be a relationship-killer? Wouldn't that just send her screaming to the nearest exit, desperate to be as far away from the extra-terrestrial freak as she could get?

And he suddenly realized that he really, really didn't want that to happen. Lois was the first girl — or woman — he'd ever known who attracted him equally on the physical, emotional, and intellectual levels. She was beautiful, she was smart, she was talented, she was both confident and modest about her abilities, and she was dedicated to justice. Was there anything about her that he didn't like?

Except for the twin facts that she was dedicated to her music and the band, and that as Wanda Detroit she was walking around with a target painted on her chest, nothing.

He was crazy to even dream about a relationship with her. He knew it, and he was sure she knew it, too. There was no sane way for them to be together and be safe. None whatsoever. He had to forget about her, if only for his own peace of mind. Just put her

out of his mind, remove her from his mental photo gallery, pretend they'd never met.

Easier to fly backwards around the world and make time run in reverse.

He finally drifted off to sleep with the lyrics to "Walk On The Wild Side" bouncing around between his ears.

>>>> Tall Dark Handsome Stranger

Lois' eyes opened of their own accord and refused to close again. Her mind was fully engaged and ready to go. She sat up in bed, awake and alert and ready to face the day.

And that just wasn't typical of Lois Lane to be awake and alert at eight-ten in the morning, whether they'd been off the night before or not.

She glanced at Lucy, who was still out cold in the other bed, so she slipped into the bathroom as quietly as she could. When she came out, Lucy hadn't moved, so Lois silently turned a chair to face the window and sat down.

The curtain blocked her view, but she knew what was outside, and she didn't want to wake her sister by letting in the morning sunlight. Lucy was going to have a stressful day, and the later she slept the better she'd feel.

Besides, Lois needed to think about Clark.

She noticed how easy it was to refer to him by his real name. "Charlie King" hadn't ever fit him, just as his cover story had never really fit him. Lois had no doubt that Clark could be a sailor, could probably do just about whatever he put his mind to, but somehow being a reporter suited him better than any other occupation. It was as if he'd been made to tell people about themselves and the things they did to each other.

She'd have to make the time to look up his older stories. Something told her that he wasn't just a crime reporter or an investigator, but that he cared deeply about people and did his best to help them by correcting as many of society's inequities as he could. He just felt like that kind of guy. He wouldn't stand by idly and allow the strong to dominate the weak just because they could. He'd try to do something about it.

Just as she was trying to do something about it.

I could love him, she thought.

Her body jerked in place. Where had that thought come from?

She knew that they couldn't build a relationship while she was on the road with the Mountaintops. She'd heard of or seen too many such relationships go down in flames because one person refused to give up the business for the other. At one time Lucy had been infatuated with Tim, the singer who'd deserted them in Denver, and before that she'd tried to keep a long-distance relationship going with a young man in Cincinnati, but nothing had stuck. Connie had been engaged to a man who'd given her the choice to either stay with the band or quit and marry him. Their last meeting had not been pleasant. Ramona had seen a relationship end in the same way, too, and even though she hid them well, her scars went deep.

Guys who dated traveling musicians wanted their girls to be around for dates and phone calls and walks in the park and Lois couldn't take that path, couldn't give up the road. Not yet. And not anytime soon.

She'd heard all the road songs and had sung a number of them, from Willie Nelson's bouncy "On The Road Again" to Bob Seger's melancholy "Turn The Page" and all the ones in between. They all had one thing in common — musicians were vagabonds and drifters and adventurers who either would not or could not put down roots, were unable or unwilling to connect to others except through their art, and who were incapable of making and keeping personal commitments. She knew that was how Clark saw her — saw all of the women in the band. Nice people, maybe, talented, fun to be around, but not the kind of girl you'd

take home to mom and dad, because she had another gig or rehearsal or audition that night that she couldn't miss.

There was no future for her with Clark Kent, insisted her mind. There could never be one for them.

Too bad her heart refused to listen.

Clark walked off the elevator to the newsroom floor at ten before seven the next morning and strode directly to Perry's office. He opened the door and stuck his head in. He stopped when he saw a stranger standing by the outside window.

"Sorry, Chief, should I come back later?"

Perry waved him in. "Naw, you need to meet this fella anyway. Inspector Henderson, this is one of my best young reporters, Clark Kent."

Henderson turned and put out his hand to Clark. As Clark raised his own hand, both of their faces changed and their hands stopped inches from one another. Perry was watching them, of course, but he didn't even change the rhythm of his rocking.

After a moment more, they completed the greeting. Henderson nodded once and said, "Good to meet you again, Kent. Thought you seemed a little too bright to be a bartender."

Clark lifted one eyebrow. "Thanks, I think."

Perry glanced from one man to the other as they released the handshake. "You two — know each other?"

Henderson tilted his head without smiling. "Indirectly. Kent was there the night I told the band at the Metro Club that their featured soloist had been killed."

"Christie was never part of the band, Inspector. She was Johnny Taylor's girlfriend. That's the only reason she was on stage with them."

"I know. By the way, that was a very good fake beard you were wearing when you started work there. Had me fooled."

Clark nodded. "I'll pass along the compliment to our makeup department."

Perry leaned forward and put his elbows on his desk. "Now that you boys know each other — formally, that is — how's about we figure out what to do about Linda?"

Clark frowned at his boss. "How much have you told him?"

"Just what you told me last night. When is her flight supposed to land?"

"I called the airline. They said that it was overbooked and seven passengers were bumped and were coming in about noon. I don't know if Linda is one of those, but it seems likely. At any rate, I plan to meet the plane when it lands."

Henderson cleared his throat. "Are you sure that's a good idea, Kent?"

Clark turned his frown to the policeman. "Are you telling me what I should and should not do?"

"No, not at all. But I think that if Johnny or one of his goons sees his new bartender talking with one of his new waitresses, the one who's just finished a courier run for him, he might get the wrong idea about your relationship. He's liable to come to the reasonable but completely false conclusion that you two are trying to horn in on the gang's action, either for yourselves or for one of his competitors."

"Oh." Clark nodded slowly. "Yeah, that actually makes sense, especially if Johnny sends a car to pick her up."

"He did. The doorman, George, is already waiting at the gate."

Perry asked, "This George isn't likely to hurt Linda, is he?"

Henderson shook his head. "Not unless something spooks him. Or unless Johnny told him to hurt her. George McDermott is a known mobster with at least three killings to his credit. He's got a rap sheet that goes back to his juvenile days. We just haven't been able to convict him of any of those serious felonies." At Clark's wide-eyed look of shock, he added, "What, did you think he was just a harmless little old doorman? George has been with

the Metro Gang since before old man Taylor earned his long vacation at the State penitentiary, and he'll do anything Johnny tells him to do. He's getting older now and his endurance isn't what it was, but anyone who underestimates him is in for a shock. He's still as tough as a fifty-cent steak."

Perry leaned back in his chair. "So Linda's safe for now?"

"I think so. Of course, with the FBI checking up on the gang, we'll know it if he does try anything."

"What about Christie's death?" asked Clark. "Have you seen the evidence I brought in?"

Henderson frowned. Since his normal expression was a frown, the difference wasn't all that startling. "I saw it. And I know where you got it. I don't like being played by the FBI, Kent, and I don't like being their stalking horse. They don't like it when we play games with them, and I don't like it when they play games with me." He sighed. "On the other hand, they're all but handing me a finished murder case on a silver platter, so I suppose I shouldn't be too upset."

"So you're going to arrest Johnny Taylor?"

"Slow down, Kent, you'll hurt yourself. The wheels of justice grind exceedingly slow sometimes."

"That's a misquote."

Henderson shrugged. "What can I say? I'm not as literate as you guardians of the fourth estate. Anyway, I still have some people to talk to about what they were doing that night. That folder you say you got from the FBI —"

"I did get it from the FBI!" snapped Clark.

"Easy, Kent. I'm just saying the same thing a good defense attorney would say. At this point, the evidence we have against Johnny is substantial, but it's also circumstantial and inconclusive. I can give you something else if you promise not to print it yet."

Both men looked at Perry, who nodded slowly. "We'll play ball, Inspector. We always do. Just remember that when it's time to print the whole story."

"You know I will, Perry. The murder weapon was a heavy glass vase about fifteen inches tall and which weighs about four pounds. There are a number of smeared prints on it, ones that look old, but there are at least two sets of clear ones, too. One set is Christie Baldwin's, and another is Johnny Taylor's. We have his on file from previous arrests."

Clark lifted his hands to either side. "There you go, Inspector! There's your proof!"

Henderson shook his head. "Johnny paid for that apartment and bought almost everything in it. All he'd have to say is that he handled it when he purchased it, or that he picked it up when he was visiting her one night. It's also circumstantial evidence."

Frustrated, Clark blew a breath out through his nose and spun around helplessly. Perry played with a pencil and said, "I thought that cases were usually decided on circumstantial evidence."

Henderson nodded. "They are, but we have to do our due diligence and eliminate any other reasonable suspect first. Your undercover girl reporter would be a very good suspect if she were just a waitress who set her cap for Johnny and wanted to get Christie out of the way."

Perry chuckled. "I haven't heard anyone say 'set her cap' in years. That's a really old phrase."

"I read Westerns. Sue me. Anyway, the women in the band have to be eliminated as suspects too. Every one of them had a motive to get Christie off the stage and out of the way. By all accounts — including yours, Kent — the deceased was more of a hindrance to them than a help. Musically, I mean."

Clark folded his arms and stared at the inspector. "That may be true, but that doesn't mean that any of those women killed her. Wanting her off the stage with them is a long way from one of them clubbing her to death."

"You're right, it is. But if I don't investigate everyone

connected with this case, I'm not doing my job. And I wouldn't want my boss to pick up his morning paper and read that one of his detectives was a slacker. It might ruin his breakfast, and I'd hate to have that on my conscience."

Perry chuckled. "That's a noble sentiment if I ever heard one."

Clark turned to his boss. "I don't like the way this is going, Chief. We should —"

"Hang on, Clark. I think we should do what the inspector suggests. We stay out of the way and let him do his job. We will also wait for Linda to contact us. There's no reason to put her in danger by breaking her cover. You agree?"

"But Linda could be in some real trouble!"

"That's true, son, but she's dug her own ditch this time and we have to let her work her way out. Besides, if we pull her out now, we guarantee that Johnny will come looking for her, and when he finds her he won't be a happy man. Best thing to do for now is to let things happen as they will, okay?"

Clark's lips thinned in irritation, but he nodded sharply. "Yes. I don't like it, but I understand where you're coming from."

"Good. Inspector, is there anything else you need from us?"

"Just those photos and that transcript."

Perry picked up another folder from his desk. "Here's everything we have on the gang so far. I made sure we kept copies for our files. And I expect that the Daily Planet will get an exclusive on all of this, plus full credit for assisting the police in this investigation."

"I can promise you that I'll mention your name when the Chief of Police holds the news conference taking the lion's share of the glory."

Perry chuckled again. "That's good enough for me. See you at Johnny's sentencing."

"That's what I like about you, Perry, you're such an optimist." He slapped the folder against his leg. "I have to get going. I have two interviews concerning this very case already set up. Hopefully I'll be able to eliminate a couple of suspects by noon."

When the alarm woke Lucy that morning, Lois was sitting in one of the chairs and staring at the window curtains. And Lois awake and alert early in the morning was not something Lucy saw very often unless they'd pulled an all-nighter. "Lois?" she called out. "You okay?"

"Sure," Lois replied without turning. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You're up early today. And you've never been much of a morning person."

"I'm better than Connie is."

Lucy grunted. "Connie is a zombie before ten-thirty. And you are too, usually. One of the funniest things I've ever seen was you and Connie on the bus that morning in Wisconsin trying to talk about the Presidential election when you'd both just gotten up."

Lois snorted. "I still say that conversation never happened."

"Connie says the same thing, but the rest of us saw and heard it. I thought Shamika was going to bust a gut laughing so hard. And it was a good thing we'd stopped for fuel or Ramona might have driven us off the road." She sat up and pushed back the covers. "But that was then, this is now. Why are you up so early?"

"No real reason. I just felt like getting up."

"Well, we're each going to talk to the police about Christie today. That's wearing on my mind a bit."

Lois nodded. "I hear you, Punky. But I think you'll be fine." She finally turned to face her sister. "You have time for a quick breakfast?"

Lucy glanced at the clock and shook her head. "Love to, but I'm meeting my attorney in forty-five minutes." She stopped and made a face. "Eww. That sounds so weird." She shook her head

and started moving again. “Anyway, I’m going to hop in the shower and head downstairs to find some granola bars and orange juice. Rain check?”

“You got it. Hey, if we see each other at the police station, don’t look me in the eye.”

Lucy frowned. “Why not?”

Lois almost grinned. “Prison inmates don’t look directly at each other. It’s supposed to be a challenge of some kind.”

“Ha. And another ha. I suppose you want me to get a head start on my incarceration experiences.”

This time Lois did grin. “It’ll make a great song once you get out. Johnny Cash got his big start from that song about Folsom Prison.”

“Oh, double-ha with a bonus chuckle.” She stood and hid her own smile. “I’m going to see if I can shower without bending over. It’ll be good practice.”

“I think that’s just the men’s prisons, but it’s good to be prepared.”

Lucy closed the bathroom door and started the water. As she undressed, she mused that if Lois was joking with her about prison, she must feel that they weren’t in any real danger of being sent there. Or even being arrested.

Lucy stepped in the shower and pulled the curtain shut as the hot water flowed over her. Of course, she thought, Lois might joke about it just to keep me from being too nervous. And Lucy didn’t think she needed that kind of help.

What were big sisters for, except to interfere in the lives of their little sisters?

Lucy had told her story to Inspector Henderson five times now, and even she was getting tired of hearing it. The inspector hadn’t been rude, hadn’t ever said that he didn’t believe her, hadn’t hinted that he thought she’d killed Christie, but he wouldn’t stop asking her the same questions over and over. Angela had warned her that this would happen, that the police would try to catch her contradicting herself, and that she needed to keep her answers short and to the point. But it was getting harder to do with each inane repetition.

Henderson stood and stretched. “Miss Lane, would you like something to drink? I’m sure you must be thirsty by now.”

Lucy lifted one eyebrow at the inspector. “No. I’m fine.”

“You’re sure?”

Angela lifted her hand and pointed at him. “Inspector, are you trying to get my client’s fingerprints in a very sneaky and subtle manner?”

Henderson’s expression cleared. “Why, no, Counselor, we’d never try such a transparent and underhanded trick like that.”

“Uh-huh. Would you like to get a copy of my client’s fingerprints?”

For a moment he looked as if he’d been slapped. “Well, if you have no objections, yes, we’d like to do that.”

Angela nodded. “Fine. If that will get my client out of here, let’s get it done.”

“Thank you. If you ladies will just go with Officer Jones, he’ll take care of it.”

Lucy fixed the uniformed officer with a glare. “Just make sure you don’t smash my fingers. I have a gig to play tonight.”

Jones nodded. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll make sure your hands are in top shape when I’m done.”

Linda flipped the magazine closed and sat back in her seat. The unyielding plastic of the terminal waiting area chairs was beginning to bruise her tailbone, but she knew if she stood up again that Juan would pop up next to her like a huge, brooding shadow.

Her original flight had been overbooked and she’d been bumped. Inter-Coastal Airlines had a policy of honoring the

oldest tickets first, and Linda’s ticket was the next to last one purchased for that flight. The next opening they had was on a flight departing at ten-fifty, and since Linda hadn’t checked any baggage they told her she was sure to get on that flight.

Juan hadn’t left her side except when she’d gone to the ladies’ room, and he’d haunted the entrance until she’d come out. The airport had plenty of restaurants and fast food kiosks, but at first Linda wasn’t hungry. She’d been convinced that the overbooking story was a ploy to keep her in Miami so the police could arrest her, but she hadn’t been approached by anyone.

And Juan hadn’t said a word to her. The only time he’d spoken was when he’d called Carlos to tell him about the delay, and apparently Carlos had told Juan to stick with Linda until she left. And Linda had only inferred that, since Juan had spoken in the machine-gun Spanish typical of Hispanics in Florida. Linda had taken three semesters of Spanish in college, but she hadn’t understood a single word of Juan’s grating mumbles over the phone.

She was hungry and tired and sore from sitting in those torture buckets disguised as chairs, so she decided to risk speaking to Juan. “Juan, is it okay if I go get something to eat?”

His immense head slowly pivoted towards her. His flat eyes bore into hers for a long moment, then he nodded and said, “Yes.”

She tried not to look too relieved. “Do you want anything? Like a sandwich or something to drink?”

His expression didn’t flicker. “Thank you, but no.” Then stood and offered her his hand.

She took it and stood up. She felt like a child next to his bulk. He reminded her of the huge man who’d played the zombie-looking butler in the old Addams Family TV show, but with less human warmth.

As she walked towards a sandwich shop with Juan looming two steps behind her, she thought again about what she’d tell Clark and Perry about this little adventure she was on. The best course was probably to insist that she’d been chasing the story and had overstepped her boundaries a little. She knew Perry wouldn’t buy that, not completely, but maybe he’d give her the benefit of the doubt.

Again.

And maybe the police would buy her story, as long as she didn’t talk to that same officer who’d taken her statement about Johnny. That woman hadn’t wanted to believe Linda two days ago, and if they met again she wouldn’t take Linda’s word for whether or not the sun was up.

She was treading water in the deep end of the shark tank, no doubt about it. And there were no lifeguards around to help her. She’d have to manage this on her own.

Clark wasn’t sure why he was hanging around outside the police station. He’d told himself that he wanted to make sure Lucy came out again, but even he didn’t believe that. Of course, if Lucy saw him, that’s what he planned to tell her.

He heard Lucy before he saw her. And she sounded angry, which surely meant that she wasn’t under arrest.

“— won’t hurt my fingers? He all but crushed them on that pad! And now I can’t get this stupid ink off! Does he not know how expensive my guitars are? I can’t get this ink on them! It’ll ruin the finish and make them worth about, I don’t know, about thirty dollars each! And he complained about my calluses, can you believe it? Every guitar player in the world has calluses on the fingertips of the fretting hand and he gripes about mine! How would he like to catch the index finger callus on the high E string and slice it right off during rehearsal? And then have to super-glue it back on so he can play that night? Does he care? Does he understand? No! He’s never — oh, hey, Charlie, what are you doing here?”

Clark gave her his best let's-be-friends grin. "I just wanted to see if they believed your story like I do. I guess you're not under arrest, huh?"

She glowered at him. "No! But I can't leave town! Can you believe it? It's like some old John Wayne western! 'Don't leave town until we tell you that you can leave town, little lady.' Grrr! I'd like to —"

"Excuse me, Lucy," interrupted Angela, "but I'd like to meet this handsome young man. Would you introduce us?"

"What? Oh, yeah, sorry. Angela Winters, my attorney, this is Charlie King, our new soundman. He's also a bartender at the club."

Clark took Angela's hand. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"Me too, Charlie. I've heard some good things about you."

He smiled wider. "Thanks."

Angela held Clark's hand a moment longer than necessary, and suddenly Clark was aware of her searching gaze sweeping over him, probing him as if she were looking for something hidden.

Then she let go. "It's good to meet you. Lucy, we're done for the day. I have some work to do this afternoon, but if you need me just call the office. Business has been picking up lately, so we're getting a full-time secretary who starts next week. No more temporaries for us."

"Thanks for everything, Angela. I've got a rehearsal at two, so I'm going to grab some lunch and head over to the club." Lucy turned to Clark. "You are going to be at rehearsal, aren't you, Charlie?"

"I plan on it. But I don't think Malcolm is too happy with me."

Lucy grinned. "You let us worry about Malcolm. We'll just turn Connie loose on him. She can charm any guy into agreeing to almost anything." She tilted her head to one side and narrowed her eyes slightly. "Except maybe you. You like girls, I can tell, but I don't think you'd fall for any of us." Her grin slowly returned. "Except — except maybe for Lois."

That was too close to the truth. "Look, Lucy, I don't think —"

Lucy clapped her hands. "Ha! Lois has a secret admirer! Wait till I tell her!"

Angela leaned in. "As your attorney, I advise you not to interfere with your sister's relationship with this man, whatever it is. It might be detrimental to your health."

Lucy laughed. "You know, you might be right about that. I'll see you two later. I'm going to catch a cab."

She jogged to the street and lifted her hand. A cab swerved to the curb almost immediately and Angela shook her head. "I never get a cab that easily. That girl's got something that men really like."

Clark nodded. "She's very attractive. And she's extremely talented. She has a really nice stage presence, too. You should hear the band play, if you haven't already."

She looked directly at him. "I plan to. And I plan to find out what else is going on at the club, Mr. King. I know the Metro's reputation, and you don't fit in there."

Uh-oh, he thought, now she's too close to the truth. "I just got off a tramp steamer and I'm waiting for my final paycheck. I've only been there a little more than a week. Guy's gotta eat, you know."

"I know." She looked at him appraisingly again. "But I think your story is more complicated than that. I don't think you're one of the bad guys." Her head tilted to one side. "I'm just not sure who you really are."

"What makes you think I'm not who you see?"

"I'm an attorney. I have lots of experience at reading people."

"Really? What do you read in me?"

She gave him a one-sided grin. "For one thing, you asked me

that question instead of loudly declaiming your innocence. It's a sign that you don't want to lie, even to a stranger. For another, if you were keeping an eye on Lucy for the club, you would have gone with her on one pretext or another. And if you were just a plain old sailor turned bartender, you would have had to work to figure out what 'declaiming' meant. I can tell from your lack of reaction that it's a word in your working vocabulary." She shook her index finger at him mockingly. "You are not what you appear to be, Mr. King."

Too late, he realized that his best defense against this perceptive woman was to just shut up. She smiled knowingly at him. "Upon reflection, I think that you'll actually turn out to be one of the good guys, Mr. King. Either way, I think we'll be seeing each other again. Ta-ta for now."

She turned and strode to the cab stand. Clark shook his head as she successfully hailed a cab. Just what he needed in his life, another intelligent and determined woman. At least this one wasn't going after him personally.

"Clark?"

The woman's voice calling his name was low and musical. He turned to see who —

Lois had stopped at the top of the steps leading into the station. She slowly descended, and as she got closer her smile grew. "What are you doing here?"

"I — I wanted to make sure that Lucy wasn't in too much trouble."

The cant of her eyebrows told him that she didn't quite believe him. "Uh-huh. How is old Lucy doing, anyway?"

"She and her lawyer just left in separate cabs. She also reminded me of our two o'clock rehearsal." He tilted his head. "How did your interview with the police go?"

Lois shrugged. "Okay, I guess. They only went over my story twice before they let me go. They didn't even tell me not to leave town, but maybe they figured I wouldn't leave without Lucy anyway."

"Good," he said. "Uh — do you have any plans for before rehearsal?"

She frowned slightly. "No. Why?"

He hesitated, then plunged ahead. "How does lunch sound to you?"

"Sounds like food, people eating and drinking, that kind of thing."

"No, I meant lunch with me."

"With you?" She stepped closer and lowered her voice.

"What would people say if they saw us having lunch together? Doesn't the club have those pesky non-fraternization rules? Aren't we supposed to stay away from each other except for work?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes. But I was thinking about having lunch at my place."

She frowned slightly. "That dump? I'm not sure I'd want to eat anything in that room."

"No. My real place. It's not that far from here. We could walk."

A smile slowly grew and enveloped her entire upper body. "Thank you, Clark. I think I'd like that very much."

>>>> Three Little Words

Clark opened the door and stepped back to let Lois enter first. Despite his ongoing determination not to involve himself in any intimate relationship with any woman, he realized that he wanted her to like his home. He wanted her to think highly of him, to like him and to approve of what he'd done with the place.

He did not, however, stop to think about what that might mean.

She didn't disappoint him. She stopped in the middle of the open living area and turned around slowly, taking in both the layout and the decor. "Clark, this is lovely. Really. I'm

impressed.”

He grinned like a schoolboy trying to look good for his first date. “Wait until you taste what I have for you.”

She turned to face him and gave him a coy look. “Why, sir, whatever do you mean?”

He stopped in mid-stride and stuttered, “Uh, no, Lois, I meant — I was talking about lunch!”

Her face colored slightly and she smiled. “I knew that. I was just teasing. I’m sorry if I embarrassed you.”

“You didn’t.” He rolled his eyes at her and went to the kitchen, then grinned shyly. “Well — maybe a little. I’m not used to entertaining beautiful women here.”

She followed him to the kitchen doorway and leaned against the frame. “I see. So you usually invite ugly women to eat here with you?”

His eyes slid in her direction. “Very funny. You happen to be both the prettiest and ugliest woman who’s ever eaten here with me.” She almost giggled at him and he smiled warmly. “How do you like your chicken, hot and spicy or more mild?”

She grinned. “I feel like being adventurous today. Make it hot and spicy.”

“Coming up. I’ve got this great combination recipe with pasta and vegetables mixed in with the chicken.”

“Do your other dates like it?”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “For your information, Miss Smarty-Pants, the only other person I’ve ever made this dish for is my mother.”

“I assume you didn’t poison her. I mean, she is still around, isn’t she?”

A spirit of mischief entered his mind and he turned mournful eyes to her. “No — no, she’s not. She’s — in a much better place now.”

She was instantly contrite. “Oh, Clark! I’m so sorry! I’m such an idiot! I was just trying to joke around with —”

“Smallville.”

“— you and I said — what?”

“She’s in Smallville.”

“Who is?”

“My mother. She and Dad live on a farm just outside of Smallville, Kansas.”

“B-but — you said —”

“I said she’s in a better place. Smallville is a much better place than Metropolis, especially for farmers.”

She stood still and open-mouthed for a moment, then irritation fought with amusement over control of her face and lost a close one. “Why you — you big faker!” She stepped closer. “I ought to whack you for that!”

“Hey! Careful, I have this big knife in my hand.”

She pushed him back against the counter and held him in place with both hands against his chest. “I don’t care! Somebody ought to teach you a lesson in manners!”

The knife clattered unattended on the counter. Somehow he both relaxed and tensed as she moved closer, their bodies almost touching. “Somebody like you?”

For some reason he forgot that he was cooking, forgot that he was on assignment for the Daily Planet, forgot that this woman was also Wanda Detroit, the mystery crime-fighter he’d been tasked to find. All he could see was her eyes. Oh, and her mouth was moving, too. She must have said something, he thought.

“What — did you say?”

Her eyes seemed to glaze over. “That — maybe I ought to — to teach you something — after all.”

He licked his lips and shifted his face closer to hers. “Like — like what?”

Something clicked in her eyes and she stepped back. “Oh — like — like how to chill wine quickly. Yeah, I can teach you how to do that.” She almost jumped to his refrigerator and yanked it

open. “Oh, good, you have a bottle here. And it’s almost full. And it feels cold, too, which is good, because if it was warm you wouldn’t want to drink it. But if it was warm I could show you how to chill it quickly. See, all you have to do is pour it into a big sealable plastic bag and put it in a sink or a small tub with ice and water in it and swish it around for about fifteen minutes and then no one will ever know that you forgot to put it in the fridge or on ice and you can put the bottle in the freezer while you’re doing that so it will be cold but it won’t freeze in that time so when you pour the wine back in it won’t — what’s so funny?”

He stepped closer and took her face in his hands. “You. I don’t think you took a breath that entire time.”

Their eyes met and held for a long breath. He thought about pressing his lips to hers, but didn’t think he could stop there, and he didn’t know how she’d react. For that matter, he wasn’t sure if she’d even welcome that kind of attention. It was poor compensation, but he decided instead to kiss her briefly on the forehead. “Do you mind setting the table? I’ll be in the kitchen for another ten minutes or so.”

She let out a long breath. “Yeah. Set the table. I can do that.”

As she picked up plates and silverware and headed to the table, he said, “It sounds as if you don’t cook very often.”

The clink of plates against wood had the sound of normalcy and sanity to him. “I don’t, and it’s not just because I suck at it. Our bus has a little-bitty fridge we usually keep sandwich stuff and soft drinks, a freezer where we store ice and frozen dinners, and a small microwave, but no stove. Besides, it’s hard to keep pots and pans on a stove when you’re bouncing along on the interstate at seventy miles an hour. We eat a lot of pre-packaged stuff and hit lots of cheap diners, so this is a real treat for me.”

He put the chicken in the pan to simmer. “I’m glad you think so.”

“Oh, it is, in more ways than one.”

She groaned silently at herself. ‘It’s a real treat for me in more ways than one?’ Duh! How could that be any cheesier? Or more provocative? How dumb could she act around him, and was she going for a personal worst here?

Get it together, Lois! she growled to herself. Don’t bait him! Don’t tease him! And for crying out loud, don’t let him put those delicious lips close to yours again!

The forehead kiss was both more and less than she’d wanted. On one hand, she’d wanted to rip open his shirt and run her palms over his marvelous pecs and his solid abs and drink in his manliness. On the other hand, she’d been desperate to escape the gravitational pull of his presence. It seemed as if the closer she came to him, the harder it was for her to think instead of react to him. And just being close to him totally destroyed her objectivity. She had been an eyelash from falling into his arms and giving herself up to the moment.

Clark Kent was the only person who knew she was also Wanda Detroit whom she hadn’t approached first with that information. He was the only one who’d deduced that knowledge on his own, and as far as she could tell he hadn’t done anything with it. No one had come hunting her with a gun or knife or club. No one had brought a newspaper front page to her while looking at her as if she’d suddenly turned orange and grown another head. So as far as her other identity was concerned, she believed she could trust him.

Whether or not she could trust him with her heart was another question altogether. And apparently it was one she was going to have to answer soon, or she wouldn’t be able to be near him without acting like a complete idiot and babbling on and on about something he probably already knew how to do and —

Shut up, you idiot! she told herself. It’s bad enough that you babbled at him, now you’re babbling at yourself!

She glanced up and saw him watching her from the kitchen

with a bemused expression on his face. She struggled for a moment, then recalled the last thing she'd said. "I mean, it's a treat to have a home-cooked meal, and a treat to be a guest in your home. I don't often have the chance to relax in private."

He tilted his head as if assessing her words, then smiled that blinding smile and said, "I don't often have the chance to relax with another person, either. My lifestyle and schedule usually don't allow me to cook for anyone besides myself."

"Too bad. You seem to enjoy cooking."

"I do. Oh, the wineglasses are up in this cabinet and the water glasses are next to them."

She hesitated. Getting the glasses meant she had to go back into the kitchen where those wonderful odors originated, not all of them having to do with the food on the stove. Her mental alarms were warning her of eleven kinds of dangers associated with that kitchen and that man.

But she had little choice. So she bit the metaphorical bullet and stepped in front of the cabinet he'd indicated, waiting for his nearness to overwhelm her.

It didn't, not quite. He stayed in front of the stove, doing something cooking-related to the chicken and the pasta. She grabbed the water and wine glasses and escaped to the dining area, then set them beside the plates.

She stepped back and realized that she'd put the place settings opposite each other on the round table. The table could seat four comfortably, but she knew if she put her plate beside his that she wouldn't be comfortable being that close to him. And she knew that if she did, she wouldn't be able to enjoy that wonderful meal he was preparing.

She didn't stop to consider that Clark might not be all that comfortable, either.

Lunch went well, thought Clark, with the conversation flowing easily — as long as he kept the table between them and the subject neutral. And the raspberry sorbet was a great finale. He probably could have dispensed with singing the chorus of the Prince song "Raspberry Beret" with "sorbet" as a substitute noun, even though Lois laughed harder than any two others who'd heard that lame joke.

He'd been apprehensive ever since she'd accepted his impromptu invitation, wondering if he was making a serious mistake by giving in to the desire to let her further into his life. On the one hand, she obviously hadn't mentioned either his real name or his real occupation to anyone at the club, so he believed he could trust her that far. On the other hand, she had no idea that he was the Silent Vigilante, and there was no way he could predict how she might react to that information, not to mention any knowledge of his extra-terrestrial origins or abilities.

And he found that he cared what she thought of him. It made a difference to him how she viewed him and how she related to him. He reveled in the intimacy of their new friendship, and he held their few seemingly erotic moments close to his heart.

But it wasn't fair to either of them to expect more than friendship from her. There was no way — absolutely no way — he would let her get that close to him, not with such a brief history between them. He couldn't afford to be enraptured by her presence, and he was determined not to destroy their friendship by throwing himself at her.

Yet he yearned to touch her hands, her face, to enfold her in his embrace, to mold his mouth to hers and lose himself in her arms. The intensity of this new desire frightened him. He'd never reacted to any girl or woman in this way, either in Metropolis or Smallville. Linda King had thrown herself at him almost from the day they'd met, and he'd never even considered her as a romantic partner. In fact, the thought almost made him gag. Lana Lang had never generated such intensity in him, though most of what he knew about kissing women came from their teenaged

experiments. Neither had he ever reacted to Rachel Harris this strongly, although he knew that while he liked Rachel a lot and considered her a close friend, he would never be in love with her.

The thought that he might actually be in love with Lois Lane, musician and deep undercover reporter, startled him, and he lost track of what Lois was saying.

He glanced up to see her looking at him as if expecting a response. "I — I'm sorry. I guess I zoned out for a few seconds. What did you just say?"

She smiled softly. "I said that it's too bad we don't have time to watch a movie. I noticed that you have a pretty good collection on your shelves, even if you lean towards the informative and dramatic rather than the romantic."

"Yeah. Uh — " For a moment, he wasn't sure how to respond to that assessment, even if it was accurate. "I have a very good memory, so after I watch a movie I tend not to watch it again for a long time, unless I have a very good reason."

She stood holding her wine glass and wandered to the couch. "You mean — like another person who saw it with you? And if you want to see it again with that person, it might be to revisit the experience of being together?"

He stood and followed her, then gestured for her to sit. "Something like that. We could talk about a movie we've both seen, if you'd like to."

She sat at one end of the couch and he followed suit, making sure there was a cushion's worth of distance between them. He knew if they were sitting beside each other he'd never be able to sustain an intelligent conversation.

"Have you ever seen *The Princess Bride*?" she asked.

He smiled warmly. "Yes, and I enjoyed it. Believe it or not, I was with my parents when I saw it. I was home during a break from college and we all went to the theater."

She sipped her wine. "Did you take a date?"

The question surprised him. "A date?"

"Sure. Some pretty girl from your high school or a waitress from the local diner. Or maybe the mayor's secretary. Or did you take one of your mother's friends?"

He lifted his eyebrows. "Are you fishing for a compliment or something?"

She chuckled. "No. I just wanted to know if you had some major emotional attachment to the memory of seeing it for the first time."

He shrugged and leaned back against the couch. "It wasn't a real date, but Rachel Harris went with us and she sat with me and held my hand and cried and clapped and laughed in all the appropriate places. And before you ask, Rachel is now the sheriff of the town of Smallville and we still keep in touch, but only as friends. That's all we ever were to each other."

She chuckled again. "I'd bet you kept your hands to yourself that day, dating a future armed law enforcement person."

"Well, her dad being the sheriff at the time helped, too."

They shared this laugh. After a moment, Lois drained her glass and put it on the end table beside her. "Rehearsal starts in a little over half an hour. As much as I have enjoyed lunch with you, I don't want either of us to be late."

The degree of his disappointment surprised him, but he knew she was right. He stood and offered her his hand. "Neither do I. If you'll help me put the dishes in the sink, I'll rinse them and wash them properly the next time I come back."

She took his hand and rose beside him. "Sounds like a plan to me."

As Clark rinsed the plates and silverware, she leaned against the cabinet next to him without touching him. "Clark?" she ventured. "Do you ever think about having a normal life?"

He glanced her way, then rinsed another plate. "What's 'normal' mean in this context?"

Her teasing mood was gone, and she didn't rise to the bait. "Oh, a wife and two-point-three kids, house in the suburbs, white picket fence, that kind of thing."

He turned off the water and turned to face her without closing the slight distance between them. "Sometimes, yes. But I don't know if I'll ever have anything like that."

She leaned closer. "Why not?"

He hesitated and licked his lips. He looked at her face but not into her eyes. "Because — because I'm not like other guys. And I don't know if there's a woman anywhere near my age who'd be willing to deal with just how different I am." He took a breath and let it out slowly. "Besides, my job is so crazy sometimes I don't know if she'd want to deal with it."

"I know." Almost of its own accord, her hands found his and she ducked her head to keep from being drawn into the depths of those wonderful chocolate eyes. "It's the same way for me — for all of us. In the Mountaintops, I mean. Ramona was seeing a really nice guy a couple of years ago, but he wanted her to quit the road and the band and be a housewife. She told him no way and he told her to find another guy. And Connie's been through the same kind of thing twice that I know of, having to choose between a romantic relationship and the band she's already given her life to." Her forehead touched his chest and she let out a tiny sob she didn't know she'd been holding in. "I want someone to love me — I really do — but I've never met a guy who could deal with me being on the road with the band for nine months out of the year, not to mention my work as Wanda. That's a — a major deal-breaker right there."

"Yeah," he breathed. "That would be hard."

"I couldn't be with a guy who'd force me to change who I am. That's not love, that's control. I couldn't take that."

She heard him clear his throat. "Believe it or not, I understand what you mean. You deserve someone who'll respect who you are and what you do as something significant and meaningful. You should have someone who loves you as you are, not as he wants you to be."

"Hard to find a guy like that. Not many guys like that around."

"No. Not many — anywhere."

Despite knowing that getting involved with him would be a bad idea, she leaned closer. "The road — it gets lonely sometimes."

She could feel his heart beating under his shirt. "Lois — I don't — I wish —"

She couldn't take it any more. She pulled away and turned around to hide the dampness in her eyes. "I wish something too, Clark, and I don't know if it's the same thing you wish, but I — I don't know if I —"

Suddenly his arms slipped around her from behind and she heard her name softly whispered in her ear. Her normal response to a guy holding her that way was to kick him in the shins and turn to knee him in the groin. She hated being held still, hated feeling trapped, hated being helpless in some man's grip.

But when she felt Clark's arms around her, it felt right somehow. So she did nothing except to lean back into him. This wasn't a controlling hold or an attempt to grope her. His embrace warmed her, gave her a feeling of security, and communicated something to her she'd almost given up on.

She felt loved.

And something in her heart broke loose from its restraints.

He hadn't meant to put his arms around her. He hadn't intended to pull her to his chest and lean his head down and gently whisper her name in her ear. And he hadn't anticipated that she'd turn around and capture his lips with hers.

But it happened. Gloriously, incredibly, deliciously, it happened. And before he realized it, her arms were around his

neck, pulling his face towards hers and kissing him like there was no tomorrow. He didn't think about where he was supposed to be or what he was supposed to be doing or what the consequences of this moment might be. He just melted into her and her kiss.

A few seconds — or hours or days, he couldn't possibly have measured the time — her embrace eased and she backed away just far enough to speak his name. "Clark?"

He could barely breathe, and he had to remind himself that she'd spoken his name. He kissed her eyes, her nose, her chin, and said, "Yes, Lois?"

She pressed her lips against his for another long moment that was too short. "There's a — a connection between us, isn't there?"

He held her closer and captured her unresisting mouth again, then turned his head and muttered, "Connection?"

"Ye — yes. Connection." She took a step backwards and pulled him along, then stopped. "Don't you feel it?"

He pulled back far enough to look into her eyes. "Connection. Yes. A connection."

He leaned close again but found the palm of her hand instead of her lips. "Clark — wait. I want to make — ohh — make sure you feel this too."

The tide of desire receded slightly and his brain came back on-line. "Of course I feel it. And it's not just animal attraction. There's — there's something inside me that reaches something inside you."

She smiled and slid her hand around his head again. "Yes! Yes, that's what I meant! It's as if we — we were two — ohh, that's so — two halves of the same whole."

"Yes," he agreed. "We — mmm — we complete each other."

"Like bacon and eggs."

"Cheese and crackers."

"Bread and butter."

"Chocolate and peanut butter."

"Laurel and Hardy."

He laughed softly against her lips and muttered, "That's it exactly." They kissed again, and this time Clark guided her back to where he knew the couch was.

Then he heard something else in her voice, something that sounded like a serious question. "Clark? Is this right?"

"What?" he murmured against her neck.

"Please," she almost begged. "Do we — do we really want to do this?"

Some part of his brain managed to catch her question and use it to slap the rest of his mind down long enough for him to think rationally. "What — what 'this' are we talking about?"

She pulled back a little farther, but not so far as to be out of reach of his lips. "This. The kissing and — and the part that usually comes after the kissing."

"The — the what?"

"Clark! We've only known each other for a few days. Do we really want to — to make love to each other? Now? Like this?"

Now she had his attention. "Oh. I — I see what you mean." He pulled back almost to arm's length. "I'm — I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking about — I didn't mean to put any pressure on you."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then spoke in a more rational tone. "You didn't force yourself on me, Clark. This was my choice just as much as it was yours. The question is — what do we do now?"

Humor. He had to make a joke and stop this runaway train before it completely jumped off the track and got them both in more trouble than they could handle. "You mean, do we want to skip rehearsal and get some more sorbet?"

She pushed back out of his embrace. "Yeah, that's it exactly, I'm talking about dessert. Seriously, Clark! I don't know what I — no, scratch that, I knew exactly what I was doing. And I knew

why I was doing it.” She turned and took another step away from him and towards the front door. “And I’m pretty sure you knew it too.”

“Well, yeah, I knew, but for a minute there I wasn’t thinking very clearly.”

She shook her head and spoke softly. “I guess I wasn’t thinking clearly either.” She turned back to face him. “Look, Clark, I think this could be a very good thing if we let it — a very, very good thing — but right now may not be the best time for — for us to be a couple. I’m not leaving the band, even for you.” She took a deep breath and continued, “And I doubt that you’d leave the Daily Planet for any woman, me included.”

He felt the smile on his face freeze and fall away. Her words might as well have been liquid nitrogen poured on his heart. “No. You’re right, this isn’t a good time for either of us to be involved with each other.” He stepped back and put his hands in his pockets. “Even if I thought that we could — could build something permanent and life-long out of it.”

Her voice caught as she repeated, “P-permanent and — and life-long?”

“Yes. That’s what I’d want out of any relationship. I’m not into one-night stands or short flings. I won’t cheapen any woman’s affection for me that way.”

She nodded. “Yeah. I — I feel the same way. I wouldn’t want to start anything I knew was going to be short-term either.”

He crossed his arms in front of his chest, knowing that the move would look as if he were pushing her away. “That’s just how I am. Permanent and life-long or nothing.”

“Me too.” She blinked and touched her eye as if wiping away a tear. “Then — then we agree that we don’t need for this to go any farther.”

He hated what he was about to say. He hated it because he knew she was right, that this couldn’t go any farther than it already had. “Yes,” he forced out. “This is as far as this goes.”

She nodded without looking at him. “Good. We’re in agreement, then.” He didn’t answer. “Then — then I’ll see you at rehearsal.” She turned and walked to the door and opened it, but before she pulled it shut behind her, she turned and said, “Thank you for the lunch, Clark. I don’t think I’ll ever forget it.”

Then she shut the door. He listened to her footsteps as she walked down the steps to the street, heard her hail a cab, and heard the door slam.

He listened to the distinctive rumble of the taxi’s motor until it was lost in the wash of city sounds.

Then he sat down on the couch and tried to decide if he was more noble than Lancelot or the biggest idiot since Adam took the apple from Eve.

>>>> You Made Me Love You

The cab ride from Clark’s apartment to the club gave Lois time to get her raging emotions under control. She couldn’t quite believe that she’d been a millimeter from ripping his clothes off and carrying him over her shoulder to his bedroom and forgetting about her sister and the band and other three women who’d dedicated their lives to making it to the big time together. She couldn’t believe that she’d been willing to throw away her entire life and her career for any man, even if Clark was that man.

At the same time, she couldn’t quite believe that she hadn’t done it.

She took a deep breath, held it for a slow ten-count, then blew it out. It was a meditation technique she’d learned somewhere, and once again it helped her focus and regain control of her emotional state. And she knew she’d need that control during rehearsal. How she was going to play while Clark was sitting at the soundboard, so close and yet so far away, she didn’t know.

And she didn’t know how she’d conceal her turmoil from her

friends. She couldn’t even blame it on her cycle, since they all knew those intimate details about each other and they knew it wasn’t her time. Maybe she could claim a bad headache or that she thought she might be coming down with something.

Oh, yeah, she was coming down with something. It was a heart condition. Probably a terminal condition, too.

After an hour, Ramona called a ten-minute break in rehearsal and walked over to Lois to speak privately. “Hey, Lo, you okay? You’ve been about a half-second off beat ever since we started. And that’s just not you, not at all.”

Lois frowned and shook her head. “I know. I’m sorry. I just — I think I might be coming down with something.”

Ramona reached up and felt Lois’ forehead. “You don’t feel feverish. Is your stomach upset? Maybe it was something you ate.”

Ramona was surprised when the bass player seemed to pale slightly. “Yeah,” she responded, “maybe that’s it, something I ate at lunch.”

That didn’t quite sound like that was the problem to Ramona, but she played along. “Okay, we’ll try to wrap this up as quickly as possible, then you go lie down in your dressing room. It’s not as comfy as a bed, but it’s better than nothing.”

Lois tried to smile. “They’re better than the dressing areas in that dive in Fort Worth. Remember changing clothes behind that blanket in the hallway?”

Ramona laughed softly. “And that little worm who kept trying to sneak a peek at us? Wasn’t he the manager’s son?”

“Son or nephew or something. I never figured it out for sure. I just never liked him, but the gig paid well and we got great reviews.”

“Yeah, those were the days, weren’t they?”

Lois’ eyes snapped into focus. “Yeah. And we’re headed for better days now, aren’t we?”

“I sure hope so. That money guy will be here again tonight and Toni told me he’s going to make a decision one way or the other. If we can get an album of our own recorded and pressed, we can probably lock up a booking to open for a name act next year. And maybe that will give us an ‘in’ with a major distribution label, and if that happens we’ll have the money to make a couple of videos and get ourselves some major exposure.”

Ramona leaned closer and her voice dropped in pitch and timbre. “We’re this close to our big break, Lois, we’re so very close that I can almost taste it! If it happens like I hope it will, in a year or two we’ll be on the cover of Rolling Stone and we’ll be calling our own shots. We’ll have major venues begging us to play for them. But we have to stick together for that to happen, and it has to be all of us. You understand?”

Lois’ face hardened. “Yes. I understand. And you’d better know and believe that I want what you’ve just described as much as you do. If we don’t make it, I won’t be the reason. I’m not Jennifer.”

Ramona nodded and moved back. “I know you aren’t Jennifer, and I never thought anything else. I just had to be sure where your head was.” She put her hand on Lois’ arm. “And you needed to know where it was, too.”

Lois nodded back. “I know. This band is important to me, Ramona. I’m not hurting our chances for the big time for anyone or anything.”

Ramona smiled. “Good. Go stretch your legs and get something to drink. We’ll see if we can wrap this up and lock in for tonight.”

The second half of the rehearsal had gone much better than the first half. Lois and Shamika had found the pocket and stayed there, even while Lois was singing her featured solo. Even the monitors had sounded better than usual.

Best of all, she hadn't needed to talk directly to their hunky sound tech all afternoon.

She glanced to the soundboard where Clark — no, she had to call him Charlie while they were here — was shutting down the board and locking the cover in place. She caught his eye for a moment, then he turned away and disappeared into the back hallway. His face looked like he felt caught between a rock and a hard place, a situation which didn't allow for contact between them on any level.

For a moment she was angry with herself. They were both acting as if they'd had an affair and had ended it on bad terms, and they hadn't really done anything! She had all the frustration and guilt of an affair and no memories of their time together because they hadn't had any time together.

That sucks, she thought.

But it was better this way, she grimly insisted to herself. Never mind the sting in her heart where the connection between her and the tall dark handsome stranger felt twisted and torn. Never mind the sense of loss and the emptiness in her chest which reached out to him for fulfillment. It wasn't going to happen. There was no sense in torturing either of them.

Lois unplugged her effects pedal to save the battery and made sure of her amp settings before locking her bass in its case. Lucy called to her, "Hey, Sis, you want to grab a bite to eat? We're heading over to some new place Connie found in the phone book, the Fudge Castle. They're supposed to have the best chocolate in the state."

Lois shook her head. "Thanks, Punky, but I think I'd better not put too much pressure on my stomach tonight. But let me know the next time you go and I'll get there first."

"You sure you're okay? It isn't like you to pass up chocolate."

Lois smiled. "I'm fine. I just need to rest a bit. You go have some fun."

"Okay. See you at seven-thirty!"

"Will do. You guys don't eat so much that you get sick!"

Lucy laughed and waved as she ran towards the others. She watched her sister and their friends all but dance off the stage as Lois wandered towards the empty dressing room to lie down. It was so wonderful to be part of something like this. Even if they never really made it to the big time and became famous and scandalously successful, the whole experience would never leave her. And she'd never regret one minute of the time they'd spent together.

Of course, she wouldn't exactly be upset if they did break out nationally. Or even internationally. She'd always had a yen to play in Australia. A European tour or two would be nice, too, and she'd love to go to one of those clothing-optional beaches in France and dare Connie to go topless just to see if she'd actually do it. Then they could —

She suddenly realized that a man close by was almost shouting in angry tones, and a woman was responding in fear. She quickly checked her surroundings and sensed no one, so she hugged the wall and edged closer.

Wanda Detroit was back on the job.

There. The voices were coming from one of the unused offices, and she could hear what they were saying.

"— don't understand where you got that idea!"

"Because your name ain't Wannamaker, that's why! It's King! And you been takin' notes! See here? I got 'em!"

"Johnny, those — those aren't mine! I don't know who put them in my locker!"

"I can read, Linda! You ain't some down-on-your-luck waitress! You're a reporter! You been spyin' on me!" Then she heard a hard slap and a gasp. "Nobody spies on me and gets away with it! You ain't tellin' nobody about my business!"

"Johnny, please! I didn't —"

"Yeah you did! But you ain't never doin' it again!"

"No! Johnny, please, no —"

Great. Linda was in deep trouble, and Lois was the only one around who could or would help her. Maybe she could slip away and find a phone in time to —

"Don't move and don't talk or I'll shoot you."

The piece of metal poking her in the back convinced her to do neither. She didn't place the voice, but anyone who'd put a pistol in her back this time of day inside the club wasn't a common mugger.

From behind, her assailant grabbed her hair and pulled her head up and back. "Walk forward and open that door."

She did as she was told. She saw Johnny Taylor standing over a quivering and weeping Linda King lying huddled on the floor. Johnny looked up, eyes blazing, and shouted, "Who let you in here?"

Lois' captor pushed her further into the room. "I found her outside listening, Johnny. I don't know how much she heard, but she was actin' like she was gonna try to do somethin' about it."

"Yeah?" growled Johnny. "Too bad for her." He yanked Linda to her feet and shoved her towards Lois, who caught and steadied her. "Okay, George, you know what to do."

Lois looked over her shoulder at the kindly older man who'd watched the front door to the club since the band had arrived. Except he didn't look all that kindly at the moment, especially with a large-caliber revolver in his fist. In fact, his eyes had morphed from their normal gentle smile to hard and flat and murderous.

Johnny had given the order, but George was going to kill them.

George nodded. "Come on, girls, we gotta go outside."

"At least go a couple of blocks away," muttered Johnny.

"Got a good spot already picked out," said George. Then he waved the pistol at the women and stepped backwards through the door.

Lois helped Linda step through the door and down the hallway. Linda was sniffing and stumbling from side to side until George grabbed her by the back of the neck and slammed her against the wall. "Shut up! You give me any trouble and I'll make it hurt real bad. Now walk!"

Lois desperately looked for a chance to dodge away, to turn and attack the older man, but he was too cautious and too experienced to allow her any opportunity to turn the tables. They pushed through an old fire door that Lois would have assumed was rusted shut, but it swung open silently and the trio stepped out into the afternoon sunshine.

Lois glanced up and realized where they were. The club was in the older part of Metropolis where the streets and alleys wound around in a rabbit warren where drug dealers and pimps ruled — with permission from and tribute paid to the Metro Club, of course. There were places here where a couple of bodies wouldn't be found for days. And that was where George was guiding them.

George was going to kill her.

Lois didn't want to die. She didn't want to miss the band's coming success or the camaraderie of the group or watching her sister grow up and blossom both as a musician and as a person and she almost cried when she realized she'd never have another chance to kiss Clark —

"That's far enough. Against that wall."

Linda leaned against the pitted brick and whimpered for her mother. Lois looked up and saw George screwing a silencer onto the muzzle of the weapon. Won't work, she thought, the pressure from the muzzle velocity and large powder charge will blow up the silencer and you can't use one of those on a revolver anyway because it still makes a big bang because of the space around the cylinder and someone —

George lifted the pistol and pulled the trigger. A sudden wind blew her hair back and she jumped back against the brick. She waited for the pain to hit but it didn't. She waited for another shot but it didn't come either. She peeked out from under her closed eyelids and saw George lying on the ground out cold. Lois slowly moved away from the wall and let Linda slide down to the ground. She had either been shot or had passed out. George was breathing but otherwise not moving. Lois quickly checked herself and decided that she hadn't been shot. She turned to check Linda, but Clark was kneeling beside her, checking her for wounds. Then Lois saw George's pistol on the ground behind Clark.

It was crushed into scrap metal. Smoke still drifted lazily from the cylinder and the bent silencer. She looked at Clark. Why was Clark here? HOW was Clark here? He shouldn't be here, no, not at all. "Bill Henderson is on the way," he said calmly. "I called the police before I left the club. Are you okay?" "Wh — who?" "Bill Henderson. He's the detective who told us about Christie." Her mind refused to turn over and she stared at him blankly. "Lois!" he hissed. "Are you hurt?" She shook her head slowly. "Good," he breathed. "Listen to me now. I need you to tell the police that the Silent Vigilante was here and that he saved you." Her head twisted and her eyes bulged. "What — Vigilante — you —" He grimaced. "Yes, it's me. I didn't have time to put on my disguise. I promise that I'll tell you all about it later, but right now I have to disappear before they get here." She nodded briefly, then pointed at Linda. "What about — is she—" "She's not hurt, she just fainted. I'm not surprised. In fact, I'm surprised you're as coherent as you are." Lois' brain was starting to kick in again. "Yeah, well, I'm very surprising at times." He grinned lopsidedly. "You are that. Look, are you going to tell my secret?" She closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. "No. Not now, at least. I owe you that much and more." "Thanks." He stood and kissed her quickly, then scooped up the wrecked pistol and began untwisting it. He glanced up to see her staring wide-eyed again. "I'll, uh, explain this later too." She nodded. "You'd better." She frowned as a thought came to her. "Hey, how did you know I was in trouble?" "Your heart rate went through the roof. It was over one-fifty and getting faster when I started following you." Her jaw dropped. "You — you can hear my heart beating?" "Uh — yes, I can. And before you ask, no, I don't hear everyone's heart, just yours." "Oh." She shook her head in amazement. "I think that talk is going to last quite a while." He grinned again and dropped the restored pistol near George's hand but not close enough for him to grab it. "If he wakes up before the police get here —" Lois bent down and grabbed a piece of broken brick. "I got that covered." He hesitated, then said, "We'll talk later, I promise." And he was gone. She pinched her forearm to make sure she wasn't dreaming and felt the sharp pain. Then she tapped the piece of brick against the wall and heard the thunk and felt the impact through her hand. Okay, this wasn't some dying fantasy, then. She really had seen Clark save her from certain death. She wondered for a

moment if he would have revealed himself to Linda, but then pushed that thought away. It wasn't fair to him. But they'd have to talk. A moan from the ground drew her attention. Linda lifted her head and said, "What — what happened?" "The Silent Vigilante saved us." "Oh." Linda shifted on the ground, then groaned, "Oh, no." "What? Are you hurt? What's wrong?" Linda lifted her face to Lois' and burst into tears. "I peed my pants again!" Lois grinned in relief. "Maybe you should take up a less demanding occupation."

Lois was fuming. "I already told you twice, Inspector! This guy came out of nowhere and took George's gun away from him and knocked him out and then ran off." "And you didn't get a look at — at 'this guy' and you can't describe him at all?" "No! I thought I was about to get shot and killed! It happened really fast and I didn't think about checking anybody for identifying marks or tattoos!" Henderson's mouth twitched and Lois thought he was about to smile, but he didn't. "Look, Inspector, I'm supposed to play two sets with the Mountaintops tonight. Can I go? Do you have enough information from me or don't you?" Henderson looked up at Linda, who was wrapped in a blanket and sitting on the curb beside a female officer, wearing a vacant expression on her face. "I sure wish the other lady there could tell us how she happened to be here with you." "I told you that too! Her name is Linda Wannamaker and she's a waitress at the Metro Club and Johnny Taylor's current girlfriend! George brought both of us out here to kill us because Johnny Taylor told him to!" "And why did he do that?" "I don't know! All I heard was them arguing about something! Then George put a gun in my back and forced me into the room where Johnny told him to kill both of us!" Henderson nodded. "Okay, so we go in and arrest Johnny now and —" "No!" she shouted. "You can't! Not yet, anyway! His sister would shut down the club and we wouldn't get to play and we're auditioning for a guy who wants to invest in the band and we have to play for him!" He sighed and shrugged. "Then what do you suggest we do?" "Let us start our set at eight and do a couple of songs. As soon as we do, you come in with your warrant and arrest Johnny. Seeing me on stage will upset Johnny no end and he might say something incriminating to you. By the time you come in, we'll know if we have that deal or not, and Johnny will be right there waiting for you." Henderson stared at her for a long moment. She didn't flinch. "Are you always this forceful, Ms. Lane?" "Only when I don't get my way." He snorted. "I can believe that. Okay, it'll take at least another half-hour to get the warrant worded correctly and get a judge to sign it, maybe a bit more, so if you hurry I think you'll be able to start your show. Just don't count on finishing it." She nodded. "Thanks, Inspector. I assume that you won't be arresting my sister or me any time soon?" He shrugged again. "Not unless one of you breaks the law." She finally smiled. "I won't. And she won't if I have anything to say about it."

Lucy was frantically pacing backstage when Lois trotted into the curtained area. She grabbed her older sister and hissed, "Where have you been? We go on in eighteen minutes!" "Hey, Luce, I'm just glad to be anywhere right now. Where

are the others?"

"Tuning up in the dressing room. What's going —"

Lois grabbed her and yanked. "Come on. I have some news."

Lucy barely kept her balance as she stumbled after her sister. The only reason she didn't fall was because she literally ran up against the dressing room door and pushed herself upright. "Lois, what's going on?"

Instead of answering, Lois slapped the door. "Let us in! I have to tell you something."

Shamika's face appeared in the doorway. "Lois! Girl, am I glad to see you! Toni come by and said you might not be here but wouldn't say why, just Johnny told her. Where you been?"

Lois pushed the door shut behind them and looked at each of the women in turn. Then she all but broke down and she hugged them all, starting with Lucy.

Shamika was the last in line and she almost stepped away, but Lois lunged for her. "No you don't, Sham," Lois said. "I need this right now. I need you guys right now."

Shamika returned the hug and said, "Okay, if you say so. But you wanna tell us why you so uptight?"

Lois moved back and dashed at her eyes. "Look, I don't have time to tell you all the details, but we need to change the order of the set. I want to do the Heart song first instead of closing the first set with it."

Ramona narrowed her eyes. "I don't suppose you could tell us why?"

"Because I don't know how long we'll be able to play before someone shuts down the club. The police — wait a minute, okay? The police are coming to arrest Johnny Taylor for two attempted contract murders."

Lucy grabbed her sister's arm. "How do you know this? Why are we switching up the song order?"

"Please, Punky, just trust me, okay? Have I ever lied to you before?"

Lucy frowned. "You said Tim was old enough to travel with the Fast Lanes."

"What? Oh, come on! Forget about Tim! I was wrong, but I didn't lie!"

Lucy glanced at the other three and realized that they were all waiting for her to finish with Lois. So she released Lois' arm and nodded. "Okay. You don't lie, at least not to me. I believe that you think you know what you're doing."

"And I don't have time to tell you all of this, but — " she stopped and bit her lip, something that Lucy hadn't seen her do in years. "This is something you all need to know. Charlie King isn't Charlie's real name. He's Clark Kent, an undercover reporter for the Daily Planet. He was sent here to get the goods on the Metro Gang in general and the Taylors specifically."

Lucy felt her jaw drop and her eyes bug out. She stared at Lois as if she'd just told the entire group that she was really a man in very good drag.

Connie finally managed to say, "So — you're saying that Charlie — I mean, Clark — has done his job? And the gig is done?"

"Pretty much," Lois smiled ruefully. "I hope the Styles Club still wants us early."

Connie nudged Ramona. "Huh? Oh, yeah, Styles, yeah, they still want us. We, uh, we can probably start as early as Friday if we get out of here tomorrow."

"I'm confident that's what will happen." Lois glanced at her watch. "Look, we have about ten minutes before we're on. I want to walk out last, plug in, and hit the opener right away. Can we do that?"

Ramona shrugged. "As long as I get the chance to set up my synth for the horn parts, yeah, we can do that. I don't suppose you can tell us why you want to start with that particular tune, do you?"

Lois grinned. "I have a very specific reason, one which I will share with all of you as soon as I have the time, I promise."

Connie smiled. "There's a lot you're not telling us, Lois, but I guess we can cut you some slack for the time being. You okay with this change, Sham?"

Shamika smiled and stretched one corded arm around Lois's shoulders and all but lifted her from the floor. "Hey, I's just the drummer chick. You tell me what song and I play it." She looked directly into Lois' eyes and lowered her voice. "You just fill in the blanks when we got the time, okay? Otherwise maybe I don't feel so cooperative next time."

Lois smiled back and twisted away from the taller woman. "Sham, you're a big old pudgy tat and we all know it. But I promise to fill in all the leftover blanks as soon as I have a chance to."

Ramona nodded. "Okay, we start with the Heart song and if we still have a job after that, we start the set list like it was set up before. Connie, you go tell Charlie — I mean Clark, right?"

Anyway, tell the sound guy about the new opener." She opened the door and paused. "I'll go set up my keyboards, and you three come up when you're ready. Lois can tune back here and walk onstage at eight sharp."

Connie looked at the sisters as Ramona shut the door behind her. "You know, when I said playing with you two would be fun, I didn't anticipate it being this much fun."

Lois sighed and crossed her arms. "Neither did I, Connie, neither did I." She shook her head ruefully. "Go tell what's-his-name what we're doing. I'll make sure Lois doesn't disappear again."

Lois peeked through the curtain at two minutes before show time and saw Johnny Taylor at the sound board talking to Clark. Johnny seemed to be telling him something that confused Clark — it was nice to call him Clark in her mind instead of Charlie — and Johnny seemed to be growing more angry with every shake of Clark's head and shrug of his shoulders. Finally Johnny threw up his hands and stalked off to his office.

Good. At least he wouldn't see Lois before they started playing.

Then she saw Toni Taylor tap Clark on the shoulder and ask him something. Clark shook his head and shrugged again, and Toni frowned and started after her brother.

Then Lucy caught Lois' eye and nodded. It was time to start the show and lay a shock on Johnny Taylor and hit him where it hurt him the most, right in the ego.

Lois stepped out from behind the curtain carrying her bass and crossed to her amp. She picked up the cable and plugged in, flipped the standby switch off and tapped the strings to make sure the amp was working. When she heard the answering thumps from the amp, she turned to Connie and Shamika and nodded. Shamika tapped her sticks to start the song and all five of them exploded into the intro chords. Connie's distorted guitar merged with Lucy's rhythm licks and slammed the club's guests onto the dance floor and into frantic activity as Ramona's synthesizer blew the horn licks out across the floor.

Lois grabbed her bass and played as if she'd just been given a new lease on life. Then she stepped up to the microphone and sang with all the verve and strength of someone with everything to live for.

— I'm so tired of these men trying to impress me with nothing

— The same old routine and the smooth fancy talking

— Now I know and believe that I found it for real

— 'Cos you're good and you're kind and you care how I feel

— I had a tall dark handsome stranger I've had the devil in disguise

— I've been attracted to the danger But I was never satisfied

— And I know what I like And I like what I see in your eyes

— Oh, you're so beautiful

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the substitute doorman slowly retreat into the reception area of the club. Beyond his shoulder she noted the presence of four stern young police officers carrying twelve-gauge riot shotguns, each with eight rounds in the magazine and extra ammunition strapped to the stocks. And she also noted the presence of the dour Detective Inspector William Henderson leading them.

— I've been pushed I've been pulled I've been put out and trod on

— Just by taking my chances I finally caught on

— When I see in your eyes all the love shining through

— I'm glad I held out for somebody like you

— I had a tall dark handsome stranger I've had the devil in disguise

— I've been attracted to the danger But I was never satisfied

— And I know what I like And I like what I see in your eyes

She changed her line of sight and saw several tough guys back out of the club's hallways and passages with their hands held outward and slightly above their waists. Then she saw more uniformed officers holding riot guns herding them inward. The crowd's focus began to shift from the band to the disturbance at the edges of the main floor.

— Heaven must have sent you I know

— You're so good to me I feel good with you

— I'd be such a fool to let you go

— There's something about you I can't live without you

As Connie began her first solo, a bartender sprinted to Johnny's office and stuck his head in. Johnny nearly knocked him down as he burst out of the office. Then she saw him do a perfect double-take as he glanced towards the stage and saw her. He skidded to a complete stop and stared as if seeing a ghost.

She was singing her heart out now, aiming it directly at Clark. And somehow she knew that he heard and understood what she was trying to say to him.

— I've had fast talking good looking men at my door

— Now I'm a wiser woman than I was before

Her eyes sought out Clark. He was standing behind the board and smiling, and she wanted to believe that he was smiling at her. None of the others knew that both of them were undercover crimefighters, her with words and Clark with his special talents. And she was sure he had more talents than he'd allowed her to glimpse. She couldn't wait to find out just what they might be.

— I had a tall dark handsome stranger I've had the devil in disguise

— I've been attracted to the danger But I was never never never satisfied

— And I know what I like And I like what I see in your eyes

baby

Lucy and Ramona joined her in singing harmony on the last chorus as Henderson stood beside an astonished Johnny and pulled a document out of his inside coat pocket. Lois thought she read the words "murder for hire," "drugs," "murder," and "conspiracy" on the policeman's lips. Wanda Detroit had helped bring yet another evildoer to justice.

She hoped Christie would rest a little easier now.

— I had a tall dark handsome stranger I've had the devil in disguise

— I've been attracted to the danger But I was never never never satisfied

— And I know what I like And I like what I see in your eyes

— Oh, yeah

They vamped over the last chorus as Connie let loose some more scorching guitar lines as Henderson snapped handcuffs on Johnny's wrists and gave him to two uniformed officers who roughly escorted him out of the building. Then they hit and held

the ending major chord as Shamika unleashed a torrent of percussion from her drumset. The patrons near the middle of the floor burst into applause and cheers, but the ones near the outside started moving towards the exits.

Henderson lifted a bullhorn Lois hadn't noticed that he held and spoke into the sudden silence. "Ladies and gentlemen! This is the police. We have just arrested Johnny Taylor, the manager of this club. By order of Judge Ernesto Sanchez of the Sixth Judicial District, this club is closed for the purpose of executing search and arrest warrants. Each of you will be allowed to leave as soon as you identify yourselves — with valid documents — to the detectives at the main doorway, and yes, we will be contacting some of you later. We apologize for interrupting your evening and ask that you be patient as we do our jobs. Thank you."

Lois stepped back from her microphone as Clark began shutting down the sound board. He looked up and caught her gaze, then smiled warmly. That connection between them seemed to shimmer in the air as Lois smiled back at him.

Connie tapped Lois on the shoulder and said, "Looks like the Marines have landed. Is this what you thought was going to happen?"

Lois smiled and nodded. "Yes. It is."

Connie didn't know it, but Lois wasn't talking only about Johnny Taylor's arrest.

Ramona flicked off her keyboards and turned off her amps. "Looks like we're going to Gotham early after all. Everybody shut everything down and start packing, but don't leave the stage unless you want to meet some policemen."

Connie perked up. "Well, policemen get lonely too, don't they?"

"I think they're a little busy at the moment."

"But they're here and I can talk to them and get some phone numbers, can't I?" Connie shrugged. "Hey, it's better than looking for dates in the classifieds."

Ramona frowned at her. "Connie, I'm warning you —"

Connie laughed. "You are just too easy, Mona."

Ramona shook her head. "That's what they told me about you, too."

Lois sighed to herself. If only everything in life could be easy.

>>>> Dance With Me

Clark leaned in to listen to Henderson as he gave instructions to the uniformed officers with him. "I want all of the club employees detained onsite and questioned here. All the guests can leave as long as we have their names, addresses, and phone numbers. Anyone who doesn't want to cooperate will have to wait to leave after we finish up with the club employees — Hey! You! Yeah, you with the glasses and dark hair! What are you doing?"

Clark realized that Henderson was pointing at him. "Me? Nothing! I'm just waiting for you to ask me whatever questions you wanna ask me so I can go looking for another job. I think this one's pretty much done for."

Henderson didn't twitch an eyelash. "Are you ready to give us your statement, sir?"

"Sure. Who do I give it to?"

The detective looked around and gestured to a young uniformed officer. "Jones, I want you to take this man's statement. Just find an unoccupied office and let Sergeant Abernathy know where you are. And take, um, take Ybarra with you. She can use the experience." He turned to Clark. "And you'd better tell him the truth, sir, or you'll deal directly with me. You understand?" Clark looked into the detective's eyes, seeking some kind of message, but found only police blue. He nodded. "Good. Go with Officer Jones."

Clark looked into the boy's face and wondered how much

experience Jones had. Then he saw a tiny young Hispanic girl detach herself from the other officers and come to stand beside Jones. If this was Officer Ybarra, she made Jones look like a grizzled veteran counting the days until his pension kicked in.

She glanced at Clark and asked Jones, “Bobby, am I supposed to go with you two?”

Jones nodded to her. “Sir, this is Officer Lillian Ybarra. She and I will take your statement. If you’ll follow me, please?”

Clark followed Jones as the diminutive Officer Ybarra, her shotgun almost as long as she was tall, completed the brief parade. Jones finally found an open area behind the coat check room and pulled out a writing pad as they sat down.

“Your full name, please, sir?”

He hesitated, then decided that Henderson would want his true identity on record. Besides, he still wanted to protect Lois’ Wanda Detroit identity. “My name is Clark Kent. I’m a reporter on an undercover assignment from the Daily Planet. My name is on the Metro Club employee register as Charlie King. I’ve been working here for nine days. What do you want to ask me about first?”

Jones’ mouth dropped open and he goggled. “You — you what?”

Ybarra recovered faster than Jones did. “You’re Clark Kent?” she gushed. “Wow! I’ve read your stories in the Daily Planet! You’re great! Oh, wow! You’re undercover?”

Clark leaned back. The girl looked almost like a groupie about to tackle her idol. “Hey, take it easy! I’m just doing my job.”

She took a deep breath and almost dropped her shotgun. “Yeah, but —”

Jones finally snapped out of his shock. “Lilly, watch your attitude! Be professional! You’re here for the experience, remember?”

She shot him a dirty look, then stepped back and assumed a more dignified demeanor. Jones turned to Clark. “I assume that you provided some of the information that prompted this raid tonight?”

“Some of it, yes. Detective Henderson has everything the Planet had as of this morning.”

“I see. Does that mean that you have gathered more information since then?”

The kid isn’t completely dumb, thought Clark. “The only thing I can add to it is that Johnny thought that Lois wouldn’t be able to play tonight. He told me just before the show started not to be surprised if the Mountaintops only put four on stage tonight.”

Jones scribbled in his notebook for a moment. “Anything else?”

“Nothing that would constitute evidence.”

“You’re sure about that? Sometimes there are little things that add up, things that don’t make sense by themselves.”

“I know. I’m a reporter, remember? I promise you that there’s nothing else I can tell you.” Not without revealing my biggest secret, he mused, along with Lois’ biggest secret.

Jones nodded. “Hey, Bobby,” asked Ybarra, “why are we even talking to this guy if we already know everything he does?”

“Good question, Lilly. I think we’re talking to Mr. Kent here to deflect suspicion from him. If the guys we don’t arrest notice that he’s getting special attention from us, it’s entirely possible that they’d decide that he’s a rat and try to take him for a ride.”

Clark’s grin flickered. “A rat? Take me for a ride?”

Jones shrugged. “I watch old gangster movies. Sue me.”

Ybarra stifled a giggle and Clark lost the battle to control his own smile. “I think you guys have a good handle on things here,” he said. “The only thing I would caution you to do is to watch out for Toni Taylor. She doesn’t look it, but she’s just as ruthless as her brother is. She’s just more polished.”

The two officers nodded. “We understand,” said Jones. “I think we should keep you in here for a few more minutes, then we’ll walk out and tell our boss how tragically uninformed you really are.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” answered Clark. “So, what do you think about the Lakers-Knicks game tomorrow? Will either of them make the finals this year?”

Jones shrugged as if to say he either didn’t know or didn’t care, but Ybarra took a step towards him. “Are you kidding? The Lakers are old and slow! The Knicks will run them off the court, now or in June! It’s a guaranteed blowout!”

Clark leaned forward. “So you think the Knicks can handle Vlade’s passing and outside shooting?”

“Pfft!” she hissed. “Outside of Divac, the Lakers don’t have any post presence, and he’s a garbage guy under the bucket! He’s more of a four than a five.”

Clark looked back at Jones. “I think the lady knows what she’s talking about.”

“She should,” replied Jones. “She was the pointy guard on ___”

She thumped him lightly on the back of his head. “Point guard, you Neandertal! How many times do I have to tell you?”

“Okay, point guard on her college team. They went to the women’s Final Four three years ago. And she’s the captain of our charity team at the precinct.” Jones lowered his voice. “We win a lot.”

Clark smiled at them. “I’ll just bet you do.”

The brown-haired elegant man approached the stage as two officers asked Shamika to dismantle her drums so they could check them for illegal substances. That drew Lucy’s attention, since the drumset was actually hers and she didn’t want to have to clean them and then retune them from scratch after “a bunch of thumb-fingered stumblebums smeared donut grease all over them.” Of course, that comment meant that every drum, whether on stage or off, had to be disassembled before the band could pack up, much less leave for the evening.

Ramona rolled her eyes and sighed. It was going to be a long night, and she doubted she’d be able to call the Styles club to try to move up their booking before the next day. She knew that the publicity generated by their engagement in the Metro Club had spread through the circuit of managers, at least on the East Coast, and that they could negotiate from a position of strength for the next few months. All they needed to keep the buzz going was the national exposure generated by a fresh album release, which she hoped would be a reality soon. And the man smiling at the cacophony and chaos on the stage might be their entry point into that reality.

The man gestured to Ramona, who stepped closer and smiled. “Hello, sir. How did you like the show tonight? What little there was of it, anyway.”

The man smirked, then smiled more warmly. “I liked it a great deal, Ms. Wilcox. And I have enjoyed the other occasions where I have heard your group play.” He draped his coat over a nearby chair and put his hands on his hips. “I am Lex Luthor, the man who is interested in signing you ladies to a promotional contract.”

He seemed almost disappointed when Ramona didn’t jump up and down with glee and clap her hands together. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Luthor. Let me come down there and we can talk.”

He looked around. “It’s a bit public for a business discussion, don’t you think?”

She measured him with a look. “We’re not signing anything tonight, if that’s what concerns you. All I want to do is talk generalities.”

He gestured towards the table beside him. “Very well. I await your arrival.”

Ramona turned and caught Lois' gaze, then gestured for Lois to follow. "Is that the money guy?" Lois asked.

"Yes. His name is Lex Luthor, and before you bring it up, we're not signing anything before we get a lawyer to look at the contract. You remember what happened to John Fogarty and CCR?"

Lois shuddered. Fogarty, along with the other three members of Credence Clearwater Revival, had signed terrible contracts with Fantasy records, contracts which threw ownership of Fogarty's songs into legal limbo and put Fogarty in the position of defending himself in court against the accusation that he'd plagiarized one of his own songs. The ill-advised contracts — which were not checked by an attorney before being signed — haunted the band to that day. "Oh, yeah, I remember," said Lois. "You think this Luthor guy knows more about the entertainment business than the guy at Fantasy did?"

"I don't know, but we're not sticking our heads in his noose. Assuming, of course, that he has a noose ready for us."

They skipped down the steps to the dance floor beside each other. "Good. Hey, I just had a thought."

"Hope it's another good one."

"Me too," Lois grinned. "You remember Angela Winters? The lawyer who represented Lucy when the police questioned her about Christie?"

"Of course. But what does that have to do with this?"

"She has a partner who does civil law and entertainment law. I invited her to come and hear us, but I don't know if she made it. Maybe she'd take a look at the contract."

Ramona frowned. "We'd all have to approve that and you know it."

"Of course I do. Besides, it's just a suggestion."

"Yeah? I'm starting to like your suggestions. Maybe we will talk to this lady tomorrow." She looked around as they approached the table where Luthor stood. "Assuming we can get out of here at a halfway decent hour. I think the police are going to be up past their usual bedtimes, too."

Luthor smiled at them. "I believe that we will have as much time to converse as we all might desire. Will you join me?"

Ramona nodded. "Yes, thank you." He held chairs for each of them in turn, then sat beside Ramona but far enough around the curve of the table so that he and Lois could also see each other.

Ramona took the lead. "All right, Mr. Luthor, let's talk turkey. Do you have investment experience with musicians?"

He grinned. "That's an interesting question. I confess that I did not anticipate being interviewed this evening."

"We'll try not to upset you too much. Have you invested in the careers of other musicians?"

He leaned back in his chair. "No. This is my first dip into the water, so to speak."

Ramona nodded. "Is there any particular reason you picked us?"

"You are talented, you work together very well, you present yourselves with polish and skill. And you have enough experience to understand both the business side and the performance side of your chosen careers. You understand the costs involved."

Lois leaned forward. "So you're saying that you didn't pick the Mountaintops because we're five poor, bereft, lonely ladies who need a gallant protector and kindly male sponsor?"

His eyebrows rose. "You are quite direct, aren't you?"

Neither woman responded. "Very well. That is a fair question. No, I have no romantic or sexual fantasies or unfulfilled musical dreams concerning my association with the band. I intend that my involvement will be completely professional and totally above board on all levels. And profitable for me, of course."

"Of course." Ramona put her chin in her hand. "What we're looking for is a chance to record our own material and get some

national distribution and publicity. We've been pushing the one album we've done since Lois and Lucy joined us early last year, but it's only about half original material and it was recorded on a tight budget. We haven't scored a distributor, and it looks like we're not going to, not without another product to sell."

"I can understand that. My people who know more about such things than I do tell me that you would have a better chance to succeed if you either trimmed your roster by one person or if you changed your name to place one of you in front of the entire group. Are you —"

"No."

Lois' abrupt declaration — which preceded Ramona's own denial by the blink of an eye — seemed to startle the man. "Ladies, you must understand that —"

This time Ramona interrupted. "No, Mr. Luthor. You sign us as a group or you don't sign any of us. We're all agreed on this. And before you suggest that we break up the group, you need to know that the Mountaintops are incorporated and that each of the five of us is both an equal shareholder in and an employee of that corporation. We also have non-compete clauses in our employment agreements which forbid us from joining another band or performing live either alone or with others for a year after severing our relationship with Mountaintops Incorporated."

Luthor blinked, then smiled. "It seems that I have been anticipated."

"We've had some experience with situations like this. We're not babes in the woods."

"It is obvious that you are not." He crossed his arms. "I take it, then, that you would prefer that your attorney examine any documents I might produce before you sign them?"

Ramona sighed, sure that she'd talked them out of yet another sugar daddy. "Yes, we would. I hope you aren't too disappointed."

He frowned. "I am nothing of the kind. If you will have your attorney contact my office either tomorrow or the next day, we can schedule a time to sit down and discuss this relationship."

Lois goggled. "You — you mean you still want to sign us?"

He smiled. For some reason, he reminded Ramona of a nature show she'd seen somewhere about Australian salt-water crocodiles and how dangerous they really were. "Of course I still want to do business with you," he said. "Lex Luthor does not quickly abandon an opportunity to make money. I believe that you ladies are destined for great things, and if I can help you accomplish those things while earning a profit for myself, then I am more than willing to discuss the possibility." He pulled a card from his shirt pocket and stood. "Here is the number for my entertainment division. I will tell them to expect your call and to set up a meeting as soon as possible."

"Thank you," said Ramona. "But why the rush?"

He looked around with an oddly satisfied smirk. "I doubt that the Metro Club will be open for a few days, and musicians who do not play do not get paid. You will need to move on to your next engagement as soon as possible, and I don't like long distance negotiations. I prefer to conclude my business agreements face-to-face."

He is dangerous, thought Ramona. I hope Lois' attorney friend is on top of her game.

She stood and put out her hand. "Mr. Luthor, I hope we can do profitable business together. Just don't get your hopes up too far. The music business can be a real meat grinder."

He took her hand and kissed it European style. "I have few illusions left, Ms. Wilcox, but I believe we can indeed create success together. Until we meet again."

He picked up his coat and slipped it on, then walked to another table where a tall and distinguished white-haired man sat. When Luthor passed the man's seat, he stood and followed at a discreet but consistent distance.

Ramona turned to Lois. “Well. He’s slicker than fresh snot on a doorknob, isn’t he?”

Lois snorted. “Yeah. Do you trust him?”

“About as far as I can throw him. I think he could give the snakes in the music business lessons on how to cheat musicians.”

Lois nodded. “Clark thinks so, too. He warned me about Luthor.”

“Really?” Ramona leaned back and lifted her eyebrows at her friend. “You’ve been holding out on us, Lois. Just how well do you know this Clark Kane?”

“His last name is Kent, not Kane.” Lois colored slightly. “And we’re not — involved in anything — anything physical, if that’s what you’re thinking. He’s a great guy, but neither one of us is into one-night stands.” She colored a bit more. “We haven’t had time for anything else.”

Ramona smiled. “You and Lucy are about the only women I know in this business who can still blush. I think it’s cute.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Thanks, I think. Why don’t we use this time to pack up what we can?”

Ramona looked at the stage. Both Lucy and Shamika were disassembling drums as fast as they could and growling at the three officers checking the drums. Another pair of uniforms was checking the guitar cases, while another one was looking and feeling inside the amplifiers. Still another one was checking the guitars themselves for secret compartments or suspicious bulges or hollow spaces. “I hope they don’t ask Lucy or Connie if they can take the guitars apart. We’ll really have problems then.”

Lois shook her head. “I think the cops are just making sure they look everywhere. See, there aren’t any detectives or high ranks over here, just uniformed patrolmen. They’re getting experience and making the department look good at the same time. I think we’ll be fine as long as Lucy doesn’t lose her temper.”

Ramona nodded. “Yeah. I’d hate to see a repeat of that night in Boise.”

Lois frowned. “We did get that judgment paid off, didn’t we?”

Jones and Ybarra took Clark to the front door when they finished talking about basketball. The two officers did very nice imitations of disgusted cops who’ve been wasting their time when they told Henderson that the bartender was new and didn’t know his elbow from a hole in the wall, or something to that effect. Henderson glared at him for a moment, then nodded for the officers at the door to let him go.

“Wait,” he said. “I need to talk to the band for a minute.”

Jones shook his head, but Henderson sighed and nodded. “Okay, but just for a minute. And don’t leave my sight.”

“Yessir! I’ll be right back.”

He made his way to the middle of the room before he spotted Lois on stage, watching the officers check their instruments. He walked up close and called, “Lois? Can I talk to you for a minute?”

She turned and her face fell for a moment, then froze into a fake smile. “Sure. Be right there.”

She retraced the path she and Ramona had taken to meet Luthor. Her steps were sure and straight, her head was held high, yet she seemed to want to be anywhere else at that moment but where she was.

He reached out to grab her hand, but she kept it away from him. “Lois? Have I done something wrong?”

Her eyes closed and she drew in a deep breath. “No,” she said. “You haven’t done anything wrong. Just — never mind.”

He stepped closer and she slid to one side. “I don’t understand. What’s the matter?”

She looked around, then sighed. “We’re leaving in a few days, with or without an album deal. You’re staying here. I can’t

do a long-distance thing with you. I wouldn’t be able to stand not seeing you, not touching you, not —”

She broke off and looked away. He put his hands in his pockets. “I’m sorry. But believe me, I understand how you feel.” He glanced around to make sure they wouldn’t be overheard, then he said, “I haven’t had the chance to tell you about all the interesting things I can do. For example —”

“Interesting!” she burst out. “That’s a nice euphemism.”

This wasn’t going the way he’d hoped it would. “I can fly, Lois. I can fly very fast. And I can meet you anywhere. I can find you wherever you are.”

Her face pinched and she sniffed once. “Oh — really? Just how do you propose to find me when you’re here and I’m somewhere in Dallas or Miami or Los Angeles?”

“The same way I knew you were in trouble earlier today. I can hear your heartbeat.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh! Right, I — I kinda forgot about that, what with all the other stuff going on.”

He looked around again. “I don’t have time to explain the whole thing, but I can hear your heartbeat. Ever since the second night I ran sound for the band, I’ve been able to pick your heartbeat out of a crowd.” He smiled and leaned closer. “Except when the band is playing, of course.”

She blinked twice. “Oh. Yeah. That would make it harder.”

He looked towards the door and frowned. Officer Jones was stalking towards him with a determined look on his face. “Look, I have to go, but if you’ll call me at my office and let me know when you’re leaving, I’ll see you off. And we’ll try to get together between now and then. Okay?”

“Clark, I don’t think —”

“I know you don’t think we can do this! But we’ll never know unless we try! Don’t you want to try?” He reached for her hands again, and this time she didn’t pull away. “Please, Lois. Let me try.”

“How, Clark?” She glanced around to make sure no one could overhear them, then continued quietly, “Are you planning to just show up at all our shows? Don’t you think someone might get suspicious?”

“No one has to see me. We can keep this private.”

“From the rest of the band?” She shook her head quickly. “No. I wouldn’t keep a secret like that from them even if I could, and I doubt it would keep for long. We’d have to either let them in on your secret and tell them that you’re — you’re some kind of — of super-man or risk tearing the band apart.”

“Lois, please!” He leaned closer and pleaded, “I don’t want to lose you!”

She sniffed once. “There’s not much to lose at the moment.”

“You’re wrong.” He cupped her face with the palm of his hand. “I may have known you for only a few days, but I already know that you’re the best part of me. And if I were to lose you, I’d lose more than I could ever say.” He kissed her gently. “Please? Can we just take this one step at a time and not borrow trouble from tomorrow?”

She shook her head, then nodded. “Okay. I’ll let you know when we’re taking off for Gotham. And I’ll try to make time to have lunch or dinner or something with you before then, okay?”

He grinned. “Great! I’ll wait for your call.”

At that moment, Officer Jones took Clark’s sleeve and began leading him to the exit. “You’ve overstayed your welcome, Mr. King. Time to go.”

He looked back over his shoulder and saw Lois wearing a wan smile. He waved once, and she waved back. Then they were at the door.

“Good night, Mr. King. Call before you come back. I’m sure the club will pay you whatever salary they owe you.”

The door slammed and he was on the sidewalk. Several pedestrians pointed at him and a man with a microphone attached

to a camera moved in his direction, but he darted away and lost them in the growing crowd. Perry would kill him if he showed up on the late TV news before he filed his story at the paper.

He walked slowly around the building opposite the club and spotted the dirty white FBI surveillance van. When he stopped to take a better look, a shadow detached itself from the dark side of the van and waved at him. “Good work, young man,” the shadow called. “Now go do what you have to do before I send Tiffany after you again.”

Clark grinned and waved back, then set off at a strong pace to the Daily Planet building.

The article was finished and saved to his local hard drive, to his archive storage on the paper’s LAN, and printed out to put on Perry’s desk. The night editor glanced through it and nodded. “Good work, Clark. This ought to win you a Kerth nomination next fall.”

“Thanks, Vic. You have anything for me tonight?”

“Nah. Go home and get some sleep. I’ll leave word for Perry that you’ll be in after lunch. Oh, you’ll need to move out of your cheap apartment tomorrow, too. We haven’t told the manager that he’s losing a tenant yet, so you need to get your stuff out of there before he changes the lock.”

Clark grinned. “Will do. I’ll see you — well, not in the morning, but soon.”

“Yeah.” He waited until Clark had walked up the ramp and pushed the elevator button. “Hey, Clark?”

“Yeah, Vic?”

“You put Linda King’s name on the byline. You didn’t have to do that.”

The door slid open. He held it as he looked back at Vic. “She worked hard. Really. And this story cost her something. It was the least I could do for her.”

Vic smiled. “Most guys wouldn’t have done that much. You’re a nice guy, Kent.”

Clark nodded and stepped into the car. “Thanks.”

Being called a nice guy felt nice. He hoped Lois liked nice guys.

>>>> On The Road Home

It was a few minutes before ten the morning after the police raid, and Toni hoped that the women in the band were already awake. She dialed Ramona’s hotel room and waited until the call went to the message system. “Hi, Ramona, this is Toni. I’m sorry to do this over the phone, but we’re closing the club for the foreseeable future and we’re not going to be able to keep you for the remainder of your scheduled run. If you’ll come by the office some time today, I’ll make sure you get paid for the shows you’ve played since your last check, including last night.” She thought about adding a personal note, something about how she’d miss the women in the band, but she decided not to. “I’ll see you later today.”

She hung up and sighed. George was in custody for attempted murder. Johnny was under arrest with several charges against him, one being that he’d ordered George to kill someone. She still wasn’t sure who George was supposed to have tried to kill, but after thinking about it all night she decided that it had to be Johnny’s new girlfriend Linda. She was the only employee who hadn’t shown up last night, and no one admitted knowing where she was or why she hadn’t come in. Maybe she could learn more when Johnny was actually arraigned in court.

Either the girl had gone to the police and Johnny had found out, or he’d just thought she had and he’d acted. Of course, if that were true, Linda was probably singing her head off about what little she knew about the club and its operations. It wasn’t good, but maybe it wasn’t a complete disaster. With Johnny out of the way, the board would listen to her. Maybe they could achieve that

low profile she wanted, assuming the organization survived Johnny’s downfall.

She shook her head. Of course they’d survive. The Metro Gang didn’t depend on Johnny Taylor for its existence. He was important, of course, but their father had been important, too, and the organization had survived his long-term incarceration. They’d survive this crisis, too, and they’d come out leaner and meaner and on top.

She looked up as the substitute doorman — his name escaped her for the moment — leaned his head into her office. “Ms. Taylor, Mr. Snell is here to see you.”

Well, she’d called and asked him to come. “Send him in.”

Martin Snell oozed into the office looking like a successful mob lawyer, which meant that Toni would want to take a long hot shower after their meeting. “Hello, Toni,” he purred. “How are you holding up?”

She waved to a chair in front of her desk. “I’m fine, Martin. Have a seat and tell me how soon you can get Johnny out on bail.”

“I’m not representing Johnny in this instance. His attorney of record is Sheldon Bender.”

“I know that. And I also know that you know just about everything that goes on in the courthouse. You’re working for the family, not Johnny specifically, so you have every right to be in on this case. When can we get Johnny out?”

His smile slipped away as he squished into the chair. “I’m not sure he is getting out, Toni.”

“What? Why not?”

“He’s going to be arraigned on quite a number of charges, including first-degree murder, conspiracy to commit murder, possession of heroin with intent to distribute, possession of cocaine with intent to distribute, possession of eleven unlicensed and unregistered firearms —”

“All right! That’s enough!” she barked. Then she sighed deeply. “What are our options?”

Snell shrugged expansively. “Your legal options are pretty limited. The District Attorney wants him held without bail, and although that’s the arraignment judge’s decision, on a case like this the judge might very well go along with the DA’s wishes. If Johnny doesn’t make bail — and I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s held without bail, not with those charges and with his record — he’ll sit in jail until his trial starts. But the DA will surely try to make a deal with him.”

“Huh,” she grunted. “Johnny won’t deal.”

Snell shook his head. “He’s already asked them what kind of deal they can make.”

“What!” The shock nearly knocked her out of her chair. “He — he did what?”

“He’s facing the death penalty, Toni. You’d be surprised what kind of pressure that puts on the toughest of people.”

She leaned her elbows on the desk and put her head in her hands. “What happens if he talks?”

“Well, you know far more about the — the internal workings of the club than I do —”

She lifted her head and glared. “Martin!” she snarled. “Tell me the truth! No evasions, no double-talk! What happens?”

He lifted both eyebrows. “All right. Nearly everyone working at the club, no matter what level or in what capacity, will face criminal charges of some kind. The board of directors will likely face racketeering charges. And,” he leaned closer and lowered his voice, “I myself will be lucky if I only get disbarred. I may be facing criminal charges also.”

She took a deep breath. “We have to do something, get him out somehow and get him away from the city. Tell me how we can do that.”

He shook his head. “We can’t. There’s no way to do that short of a jailbreak. No judge is going to issue him a release before his

trial if he's held without bail, and I don't have any leverage over the DA's office. Face it, Toni, your brother is going to be in jail for the foreseeable future."

Toni stood slowly and walked to the wall where a portrait of her father hung. The picture had been taken back in the days when he'd ruled this part of the city with an iron hand. She reached out and touched it tenderly, wondering what to do, wishing he could advise her some way.

Then she noticed her reflection in the glass. She could see the makeup covering the discolored flesh left over from the latest beating Johnny had given her. She saw her hair and remembered how painful it still was to brush it, and how bruised her scalp still felt. She remembered the times that he'd told her that she wasn't Pop, that she was just his dumb baby sister and she'd never run the gang, that she'd never be anything more than a glorified secretary.

And she remembered that day in the board meeting when Johnny had pointed a pistol at her head and threatened to blow her brains out.

A wild idea leaped into her head and formed itself into a concept. "Martin," she asked mildly, "what would happen if something — something happened to Johnny?"

"You mean, something permanent?"

She noted how unsurprised he sounded. "Yes. What would happen?"

"I assume you mean, what would happen to the case. Well, without Johnny's direct testimony, it would be a great deal more difficult to proceed with the other actions I mentioned, with the exception of the attempted murder charge against George. But it would take much of the legal pressure off the club and the board, not to mention my own humble self."

She stood looking at the picture of her father. She wondered how he'd react if he knew she was thinking about ordering a hit on his son.

Of course, he need never know. "Martin, is there any way you could — could assist us in this matter?"

"Me?" Even his fake surprise felt slimy. "I'm an officer of the court. I have a sworn duty to uphold the law. And I'm required to adhere to a strict code of ethics." He polished his fingernails against his lapel. "We are talking about a hypothetical situation here, aren't we?"

She turned to face him and gave him her best fake smile. "Of course we are. You know, Johnny's made a lot of enemies, and some of them might think this would be a good time to strike back at him."

"That's true. Actually, I am acquainted with someone who might have a vested interest in seeing that Johnny Taylor is no longer around to — ah, interfere with his or her many business ventures."

Luthor! He was talking about Lex Luthor having Johnny killed! She controlled the shiver running along her spine and calmly asked, "Is there any way that I might talk with this man?"

Snell smiled again. "I never said this person was a man."

She nodded once. "That's true, you didn't. Is there any way that I might meet this — person?"

"That's not my decision, Toni, but I believe that this person might wish to do business with you. Of course, the negotiations might be held through a third party — someone such as myself."

"That would be acceptable to me."

He stood up. "I'll get back to you as quickly as I can."

She crossed her arms and stepped closer. "Thanks for coming by, Martin. I look forward to speaking with you again."

"It will be soon, I'm sure. If we wait too long, Johnny will have already told everything he knows."

"I know. When do you think you can call me back?"

He extended his hand to shake hers. "I hope to have something concrete by noon today."

She took his hand and shook it lightly. "Thank you, Martin."

"Don't be surprised if the price is a bit steep."

"Don't worry. I know the cost of doing business."

Toni walked him to the door and opened it, then gestured to the first person she saw. "Anita, please walk Mr. Snell to the door. Then get Charlie King on the phone. His hotel number is in the bartender's directory."

"Yes, ma'am."

She closed the door and leaned against it. She was going to do it. She was going to take over the club and the gang, and she was going to do it the old-fashioned way. It was totally out of character for her, but she didn't see any other viable option. Maybe acting out of character would deflect suspicion away from her. Maybe — if she needed the camouflage — she could point the finger at one of the other directors just to muddy the waters for the police.

And sub-contracting the job to Lex Luthor was a dangerous and delicious irony. Her most deadly rival would be removing her most stubborn impediment to power. And Luthor would, of course, try to leverage her with that information, but she wouldn't let him.

But now she needed a distraction, and Charlie would be it. He was a gentle and caring man, evidenced by the concern he'd shown her the night Johnny had beaten her, and he'd jump at the chance to comfort her. As a bonus, he was young and strong, handsome and unattached, unemployed for the moment, and if she eventually tired of him, no one would miss him if he didn't want to fade away quietly.

The fact that she was behaving exactly like her brother would in the same situation never crossed her mind.

A knock sounded at her door. "Come in."

Anita cautiously stuck her head around the door. "Ms. Taylor, I can't get a hold of Charlie. He ain't there."

She frowned. "So? Leave a message with the hotel manager for him to call me."

"No, ma'am, he ain't there at all. He moved out this morning, 'bout half a hour ago. Manager said Charlie was leavin' town."

Her shock was palpable. "He — he what?"

Anita's eyes bulged and her mouth fell open. "He — he left town. M-ma'am!"

Toni's mood shifted to cold fury. Anita must have sensed it, because she quietly slipped out of the office and closed the door before Toni could speak.

He was gone? Now? Just when she was about to do him the biggest favor of his life? The idiot! The ingrate! Let him go! He'd never know what he missed! The fool!

She took several deep breaths to regain control, then picked up the phone again and dialed the internal number for her driver. An early lunch would be a good thing today.

Mouse turned and gestured to Billy. "The man needs to hear this."

Billy wheeled his chair towards the console. "Why? What'd they say now?"

Mouse smirked. "Toni Taylor is going to put a hit on her brother."

Billy's eyes popped. "Toni's gonna have Johnny whacked? You're kidding!"

Mouse laughed. "Nope. I've got it on tape. She's going through Martin Snell to farm it out to someone else."

Billy shook his head. "I guess Johnny must be singing his head off about now."

"If he's not, he will be soon. I'd love to be there when the DA plays this tape for him."

"Uh — are you sure that's going to happen?"

"Of course it — oh. You mean, can we find another enterprising young reporter to 'steal' the tape from us?"

“The regional director was really mad when he found out about that transcript and those pictures ending up with the Metropolis PD.”

“I can imagine. Well, I guess Johnny Taylor can take his chances. If he sings soon enough, maybe he’ll dodge this bullet too.”

“Sure. How much you want to put down on it?”

“With Snell in the picture? He’ll broker an Intergang killer to take out Johnny and no one will ever know who it was. That’s a sucker bet and we both know it.”

“Yeah.” They were both silent for a long moment, then Mouse asked, “So, do you like the Knicks or the Blazers tomorrow night?”

“How many points?”

Ramona and Shamika sat down at the conference table across from the tall, bespectacled woman, who smiled at them as she sat down. “So, you ladies are from the Mountaintops?”

They nodded. “I’m Ramona Wilcox, the band’s business manager. This is Shamika Jones, our drummer. We didn’t bring Connie Vandross, our guitarist, because we didn’t want duelingConnies.”

Connie Hunter laughed. “Pleased to meet you both. Do you have the authority to retain me as your legal representative, or are you just interviewing me?”

“Ideally,” said Ramona, “we’d like to finalize our agreement right now. We’re expecting a call from someone who’s willing to fund our next album and help us distribute it, and we don’t want to be taken for a ride on the money end.”

Connie Hunter nodded. “That’s certainly understandable. What kind of deal are you looking for with this person?”

“One that provides us with the money to record the album in one single stretch of time, so we don’t have to go back out on the road to support ourselves before we finish it.”

“We don’t wanna get stuck payin’ for this cat’s dry cleanin’, neither,” added Shamika.

Connie smiled. “I understand. This person is going to want his money back on a timely basis, in probably no more than a year, and he’s also going to want a slice of the album revenue and some of your take while you’re touring to support it.”

“Two out of three isn’t bad,” Ramona answered. “It’s right and proper that the investor make a healthy profit on this deal, but we don’t want to cut into our meal money. We’re willing to give up a slightly larger piece of the album revenue pie, but we don’t want anyone touching our tour income. That’s what we live on.”

Connie frowned. “Your investor isn’t going to like that, Ramona. Most of these venture capital agreements tie up the artists’ income for several years.”

“I know, but that’s what all of us have agreed to do. We suggest that we get fifty thousand up front for recording studio expenses, pressing the first run of discs, and our living expenses for two months while we’re in the studio.” Ramona winked at Connie. “Just between you and me and our drummer, I think we can wrap the whole thing for about thirty-five grand, but I’d like to have some wiggle room if we need it.”

“That’s not a bad idea. What else?”

“He also helps us set up a tour to promote the project and distribute the album, whether we open for some big-name band or headline our own shows, and until we repay the principal he gets seventy percent of the profit from the album sales, whether at our shows or in record stores. After that, he gets thirty-five percent until he earns a fifty percent annual yield on his initial investment, figured on a quarterly basis, or three years have passed from the date the agreement is finalized, whichever comes first.”

“Whoa. That’s certainly different.”

“He think we that good, he oughta jump on it like a duck on a junebug.”

“What if he’s looking for a long-term relationship, Shamika?”

“That where Mona got creative. See, if we hit three years and he ain’t made back his money, he ain’t gonna wanna be stuck with us. And if we break out, he make his money back that much faster and we get shut o’ him faster.”

Connie sat back. “If you really want me to present this proposal to him, I will, but I can tell you now that he probably won’t sign off on it. He’s going to want more, like some input on the songs you put on the album, the arrangements —”

“He ain’t getting’ none of that.”

“I’m just telling you what other men like Luthor do when they delve into the music business. He might even try to foist off his girlfriend on you as a new band member.”

Ramona shook her head. “We’ve already told him that we’re not making any lineup changes. And how did you know that Lex Luthor was the money man?”

“Word travels fast in this town. Every musician in the state knows that Luthor has been hunting for a band to bankroll for the last six months or so. And nearly every one of them also knows that he’s been to three or four of your shows at the Metro Club. I saw him there one of those nights.”

Shamika smiled for the first time. “So, you come to hear us? What you think?”

Connie nodded. “You ladies are very good and you have every chance to break into the big time. Musically, at least, I think you’re ready to do just that. Are you ready to take this ride together with me?”

Shamika started to hold out her hand, but Ramona stopped her. “One more thing, Connie. The matter of your retainer.”

Connie nodded again. “I can work with you on a base monthly rate and a small percentage of your net income, say six percent, or I’ll accept a larger percentage — say nine percent — without a base rate. What’s your preference?”

Ramona smiled. “What’s yours?”

Connie tilted her head to one side as if considering her options. “If we’re talking a long-term relationship, say five years or more, I’ll take the nine percent and I’ll act as your booking agent as well. I think you ladies will make me very comfortable at that level. Besides, most agents take ten percent instead of nine.”

“Will you take eight and a quarter?”

“What! Eight and a quarter? No way! I tip better than that!”

“I don’t. How about eight and a half?”

Connie frowned and shook her head. “I feel like I’m arm-wrestling an octopus. Nine percent is my cut, Ramona.”

Ramona made eye contact with her and nodded. “Okay. What if we split the difference? You take eight and three quarters.”

Connie hesitated, then laughed. “Sheesh, you drive a hard bargain! Yes, I’ll take eight and three quarter percent of your net profit for five years.”

“Four years, with another four years as an option. Pending the deal with Luthor, of course. For that you get a flat fee, separate from the other money.”

Connie smirked at them. “I’m going to have to watch your backs and my own as well in this relationship. Done and done. I’ll have the paperwork ready tomorrow morning at ten o’clock in my office. I’ll need for all of you to be there.”

“We will be, Ms. Hunter. Just remember that even though we’re disgustingly nice people, we pay off on results, not vain promises. I don’t want to have to write a song about you.”

“You mean in the vein of ‘Zanz Can’t Dance?’ You do know how much legal trouble John Fogarty got into with that tune, don’t you?”

“Yes. But we’re so much more subtle than that, I promise.”

Shamika looked at Ramona. “Can I shake her hand now or

you gonna make her sign in blood or somethin'?"

"Go ahead, Sham. I'm just trying to make sure we're protected from all angles."

Connie took Shamika's hand and looked her straight in the eyes. "Protection for you ladies? From me? I think I'm the one in this deal who's going to have to wear Kevlar underwear."

Clark picked up his phone after the first ring. "Daily Planet news floor, Clark Kent speaking."

"Clark? It's me."

He forgot the Silent Vigilante story he was working on.

"Linda! Where are you? What's going on?"

"I — I can't tell you where I am. I'm in protective custody until after the trial. The marshals are letting me call you this one time, but you won't hear from me again."

"What? Why not? What are you talking about?"

She sniffed. "I got in too deep, Clark. I was stupid. They were going to charge me alongside Johnny unless I cooperated fully. And when I testify, Johnny will know who I really am and my life won't be worth a dime."

"But — " His protests fell flat, even to his own mind. She was right. He didn't say anything else, and she was silent, too.

He listened to her breathe for a few moments, then asked, "Linda? Why are you calling me?"

"To say — to say goodbye. I'm sorry I was so terrible to you."

"What? What do you mean, goodbye? Where are you going?"

She sniffed again. "The Federal witness protection program. I'm going to be someone else in a few months and be somewhere else. I doubt that I'll ever see you again."

He was stunned again. "Witness protection? Linda, maybe you —"

"It's part of the plea deal, Clark. After I testify I disappear. Johnny won't be able to find me. I don't even know where I'm going or what my name will be. I'm supposed to testify in the Miami trial, too, against Carlos and Juan. Wait, you don't know about them. They're Johnny's connection in Miami. And if I don't do this whole thing the way the cops tell me to do it, they'll charge me and put me in prison."

"I — I'm sorry."

She sighed deeply. "I'm sorry too. But maybe this is for the best. These last few weeks, I haven't liked myself very much. I think that's why I was coming on to you so hard, to try to prove to you, to myself, to somebody, that I wasn't such a terrible person. Trouble is, I really was a terrible person."

"You weren't terrible, Linda."

She almost laughed. "Only 'not terrible?' That's a left-handed character reference if I ever heard one. Anyway, I hope you have a wonderful life. You're already a fantastic reporter and I know you'll only get better. Oh, and please tell Perry that I'm grateful for the opportunities he gave me. I'm only sorry that I didn't do more with them."

"I will." There was an awkward pause, then he said, "Well, I need to get back to work. I'll talk to — no, I guess I won't talk to you later."

"No, you won't. This is goodbye. Take care, Clark. And I hope you find someone who really loves you. You deserve it."

Wow, he thought. Maybe this is ultimately a good thing for her. "Thanks, Linda. You do something positive with the rest of your life."

"I'll try. You keep fighting the good fight. Goodbye, Clark."

He tried to find something else to say, but he couldn't. "Goodbye, Linda."

She ended the call. Clark held the phone until the dial tone sounded, then he hung up.

Linda was gone from his life forever. Oh, he could probably find her if he really wanted to, but he knew he wouldn't try. It

was a mild shock to know that she'd never lean over him at work or rub his shoulders whether he wanted her to or not, that she'd never flirt with him again in a meeting or touch him on the leg when they were going over notes. He wondered how long he would look over his shoulder for her.

Linda was gone. What a relief.

Lois sat in the chair outside the police conference room and waited. She didn't understand why Lucy and her lawyer had to come in to talk to the police again. She didn't understand why she had to come in and talk to them, either. Johnny Taylor was in jail for killing Christie Baldwin, among other reasons, and George McDermott had been arrested too. He'd suffered a mild concussion when Clark had knocked him down, something that Lois was sure Clark hadn't meant to happen, but as soon as he got out of the hospital he would join his boss behind bars.

And why Lucy was still involved was beyond Lois. Neither of them should have been where they were. Lois, at least, should have been enjoying a meal with Clark, but no, the girls in the band had kept her busy day and night with legal details and working out new arrangements and trying to write some new songs for the upcoming album, and she was frustrated at being kept away from Clark. Ramona had arranged for them to begin their gig in Gotham City a week early, they were scheduled to leave in two days, and she and Clark still hadn't had any real time together.

Oh, they'd eaten a picnic lunch in Centennial Park when Clark had momentarily escaped the office the day before, but between wrapping up his own investigation at the club and his work at the paper, he hadn't had much time either. And she could tell that it bothered him every time one of them had to call off a dinner or a lunch or even an afternoon snack. It was almost as if the universe were conspiring to keep them apart. Of course, that only made her more determined to see him again.

The opening door took her away from those bleak thoughts as her sister walked out of the conference room and spotted her. "Lois! Good, you're right here. I'm all done, free and clear. Clark sure helped clear that up with that evidence he brought over. Come on. Inspector Henderson is ready for you."

Lois stood and looked around. "Where's your lawyer?"

"She's waiting for you in there. She's agreed to assist you since it's no longer a criminal investigation."

"I don't need a lawyer. We went over this —"

Lucy cut her off. "Lois. Go in there now. Sit down. Listen to Angela. Talk when she says to talk. Shut up when she says to shut up. Sign what she says to sign."

Lois looked at her suddenly assertive sister and shook her head. "Wow. What did you have for breakfast this morning?"

"A dose of common sense." Lucy took her sister's arm and pushed her towards the door. "You know the saying that what's good for the goose is good for the gander?"

"Yeah, but —"

"Then just do what I tell you to do and you'll be fine."

Lois stopped and almost laughed. "You sound like me."

"Really? I guess I've heard it often enough from you." She pointed at the open doorway. "Now get in there and behave yourself. I'll be out here waiting for you."

Lois smiled. "Okay, Punky." Then she stepped back and looked her sister up and down. "You know," she continued thoughtfully, "you have really grown up."

Lucy fixed her with a hooded glare and pointed. "Go."

Lois smiled wider and surrendered to the inevitable.

Lucy lay back on the hotel bed and smiled at the ceiling. Despite all the trouble they'd had on this gig, things had turned out well. They were leaving in the morning for an extended stay in Gotham City, they'd found a source of money and a

distribution network for a new album of original tunes, there were good prospects for a late winter and spring tour opening for a major act, and best of all, Lucy was free and clear from the law.

She hadn't admitted it to anyone, not even her sister, but she'd been terrified that someone would stand up in the police station and shout, "There she is! That's the woman who killed Christie Baldwin!" Then she'd be arrested, booked, processed, strip-searched, given an ugly jumpsuit to wear, pushed into a cell and locked in —

She shuddered and shook her head. That was over and done with. Things were going well and she refused to jinx herself. No more murder accusations for her, that was for certain.

She heard the toilet flush in the small bathroom and sighed. Everything was going well except for her sister.

Lois opened the bathroom door and shuffled to the other bed. She sat on the end and stared at the wall.

This couldn't continue.

"Lois? Hey, it's still early. What do you say to a pizza?"

There was no response. "Come on, Sis! What do you say?"

Lois moved her head slightly. "Is that a question or a riddle?"

"What? Oh, right. No, just a question." Lucy moved to her sister's side. "Come on! We'll eat too much and tell bad jokes until the soda squirts out our noses! It'll be like old times!"

Lois slowly patted Lucy's hand. "I know what you're trying to do, Punky, and I appreciate it. But I don't feel like it. Not tonight."

"Okay. What do you feel like? I'm sure the hotel has some board games. Or I can go get Scrabble out of the bus." Lois withdrew her hand. "Come on, Sis! You love making up those words in Scrabble! Remember when you tried to use 'chumpy' to get a triple word score?"

Lois smiled ever so slightly. "Thanks, Luce, but I'm just going to lie down and sleep. I'm so very tired."

Lucy sighed and nodded. "It's Clark, isn't it?" Lois went still at the mention of his name. "You're really hung up on him, aren't you?"

Lois looked away. "Yeah," she breathed. "I am."

"Uh-huh. How hung up on you is he?"

Lois shrugged. "About the same, I think." She chuckled for a moment. "I hope." Then she sniffed once. "No, I don't hope that. I'd hate to think that he was hurting as — as much as I am."

Lucy reached out and hugged her big sister. Lois leaned into Lucy and started crying. "Hey, hey, it's okay, Sis, it's okay."

"No," sobbed Lois, "it's not okay."

Lucy stroked Lois' hair. "Then it will be. I promise."

They sat together, rocking gently back and forth, until Lois' tears subsided. She wiped her eyes with her hand and tried to smile. "I used to — to do this with you. After Dad — after Dad died. I'd hold you and rock you and tell you that everything was okay."

Lucy kissed Lois on the forehead. "I remember. And when I said it wasn't okay, you'd tell me that even if it wasn't okay now, it would be. And you know what? You kept your word." Lucy hugged her sister close. "You've always kept your word, Sis. And I've always trusted you. Will you trust me now?"

Lois returned the embrace and nodded against Lucy's shoulder. "Yes. I'll trust you." She sat up and smiled through her tears. "But only because I've taught you so very well."

They shared a soft laugh, then Lois exhaled and almost collapsed in on herself. "I'm really wiped out, Punky. I think I'd better go to bed while I can still find the pillows."

"No problem. I'll take care of everything tomorrow. You just show up at the bus on time."

Lois cupped her sister's face with her hand. "I'll be fine. Because you're taking such good care of me." She sighed. "My little sister really is growing up. Before long, you won't need me any more."

Lucy smiled and shook her head. "I'll never be quite that grown up, Lois. We'll always need each other. Right now, though, you need to get some sleep."

"You talked me into it." Lois leaned back and let Lucy pull the covers up to her chin. "Goodnight, Luce."

Lucy snapped off the reading lamp above Lois' bed. "Sweet dreams, Sis. I'll see you in the morning."

Lucy waited until Lois began her patented ladylike snores, then she slipped out the door and closed it as quietly as she could. Then she marched to the band's other room and knocked on the door.

Ramona opened up and leaned out. "Hi, Lucy. How's our favorite bass player?"

Lucy shook her head. "Not so good. She's having a rough time right now."

The keyboardist sighed. "I wish there was something we could do for her."

Lucy's eyebrow rose and an evil grin spread across her face. "Actually, that's why I'm here. Do you and the other two reprobates in there want to have dinner with me and then make an unannounced nocturnal visit to a certain reporter who's gotten so far under Lois' skin it'll take surgery to get him out?"

"What? Why do you — oh, no, Lucy, you don't mean want us to —"

"No!" Lucy raised her hands in surrender. "I don't want to beat him up! I just want him to get something resolved with Lois. I don't want her pining for him for the next fifteen thousand miles."

"Really? You really want to do this? Right now?"

"Well, yeah, since we're leaving tomorrow morning and I don't see him flying after us everywhere we go. Somebody has to make a decision tonight."

Ramona's eyes rolled up in her head. "You still don't do things the easy way, do you?"

"Why should I? This way's more fun."

"Great," sighed Ramona. "As if I don't have enough fun in my life as it is."

>>>> Total Eclipse of the Heart

It was eight-fifty in the morning and almost time for the Mountaintops to leave Metropolis for a four-week gig in Gotham City's Styles Club before heading for an extended professional recording session and Clark had promised to be there to see her off.

But he wasn't there.

He'd promised.

But he hadn't come.

Not only was he not there, he hadn't called, he hadn't sent a message, he hadn't loosed a carrier pigeon, he hadn't written a goodbye song for her, he hadn't sent a singing messenger, he hadn't tapped out a telegram. Nothing.

Maybe he was wrapped up in some Silent Vigilante thing. Yeah, that had to be it. That was the only thing that could have kept him away from her. It was the only thing that made any sense.

But it still hurt.

It really hurt.

She knew there was no way for them to build a relationship, not with her on the road or in the studio and him stuck here in Metropolis. The logical part of her mind sadly argued that this was for the best, that trying to keep something going with him would only hurt them both even more.

The part of her mind connected to her heart told the logical part to shut up. It did.

Connie stepped off the bus and slowly approached her.

"Lois?" There was no answer. "Lois, honey, the bus is ready to leave. We have to go."

Lois stifled a sob. “Yeah. I know.”

Connie gently touched Lois’s shoulder. “If he was going to come, he’d be here by now. You know how these things are. Most guys don’t want to get involved with someone who’s on the road forty weeks a year. It scares them off. Believe me, I know. I’ve had to deal with this more than once in my life.”

Lois shook her head. “Clark’s not like most guys. He’s different.”

“Maybe he is different, but —”

“He’s different!” snapped Lois. “He’s not like any other man I’ve ever met.” And I’m not sharing with anyone just how different he is, she snarled to herself.

Connie stepped back. “Okay, he’s different. And the evidence he dug up helped Lucy get cleared of a possible murder charge. And he helped us get loose from both the police and the Metro club. He did some really good things for us.” She paused, then continued softly, “But is he here for you? Right now? Do you see him here?”

Lois lifted her hand to shade her eyes from the morning sun, then dropped her hand and seemed to deflate. Connie put her arm around her friend’s shoulders. “Come on. We got four weeks in Gotham City, a week off for rehearsals and arranging, then two months of recording in Muscle Shoals. Then we open for the Falcons for eight weeks on their winter West Coast tour. Thanks to Mr. Luthor and his publicity machine, the critics and our fans are already panting for our new album and we don’t want to disappoint them.”

Lois sniffed and wiped her eyes. “No. I mean, no, we don’t want to disappoint the fans and the critics.”

“Then let’s go, okay? We have some breakfast stuff on the bus. You’ll feel better after you get something to eat.”

Lois allowed Connie to turn her around and guide her to the bus door. Lois clomped up the steps and shuffled down the center aisle towards the cramped dining area, with Connie nudging her forward after every third or fourth baby step. “This is going to be such a crappy trip,” she muttered.

She heard the peal of Lucy’s laughter from the dining area as she reached for the door. How could Lucy be having such a good time when Lois was lower than a snake’s belt buckle? And when even thinking that made her think of how Clark wasn’t here with her? What could Lucy possibly think was so funny when Lois was hurting so badly?

Then she heard a male voice respond.

An unreasoning fury exploded in her head. First Clark didn’t show, didn’t send a message, didn’t even have the decency to call and make up some lousy excuse she’d never believe in a million years, and now Lucy has a guy on board before they even leave Metropolis! What about the rules that said no passengers? And especially no boyfriends on the bus, not ever?

Lois was so mad she suspected that she was about to become an only child. She yanked the door open and shouted, “Lucy, you creep! What do you —”

She got no further.

Lucy turned in her seat and said, “Hi, Sis! Clark was just telling us about his senior prom in Kansas and the girl he took. I asked him if they found a good make-out spot after the dance, and he said that he didn’t think it was all that healthy for him to keep the sheriff’s daughter out late and then bring her home with a hickey on her neck! Isn’t that a hoot?”

Clark smiled up at her from the side of the table opposite Lucy. “Good morning, Lois. I brought fresh croissants and a couple of flavors of preserves, and I even found a shop with fresh bagels and cream cheese. Want some?”

Shamika reached over Clark’s shoulder and picked up the top half of a bagel. “They’re real good, too. We gotta keep this boy around for his breakfast-findin’ skills, if nothin’ else.”

Lois stood frozen to the floor for a few seconds, then her face

darkened as she turned on a smug and quietly hysterical Connie. “You — you turkey! You let me think he’d stood me up! What kind of nasty trick is that?” Behind her, Lucy tried unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh, which drew Lois’ index finger as if it were a rifle barrel zeroing in on a particularly tempting target. “And you roped the whole band into it, too!” she snapped at Connie. “Even my sister! You traitorous blond twit!” Lois turned again and stomped closer to lean over the table towards Clark. “And what are you doing on this bus, mister? It’s for band members only!”

From the far end of the room, Ramona — whom Lois had not yet noticed — innocently said, “Lois! I’m glad you’re here. Let me introduce you to Clark Kent, our new sound tech and head roadie. He’s on the payroll, just like you and I are. We finally decided that you were right, that we really needed someone to mix sound for us full time.”

Lois’s face betrayed her shock. “What? He — Sound tech? You mean — you’re saying he’s —”

Clark stood and enveloped her in a bear hug. “Yep. I’m with the band.” Then he laughed. “You know, I’ve always wanted to say that. It sounds so cool. I’m thinking of getting a baseball cap with that saying embroidered across the front.” He pulled her close and picked her up off the floor for a moment, then set her down again. “Maybe I can get one for everybody, with a mountain logo behind it. We could even sell them at concerts.”

“That’s a good idea,” Ramona said. “You’re paying off for us already, Clark.”

Lois’s arms windmilled helplessly under his for a few seconds, but then she gave up the struggle and returned the embrace. “You big idiot!” She buried her face in his chest and inhaled his scent. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Me, too.”

She pressed her cheek against his shirt and asked, “What about your other job at the Daily Planet?”

He chuckled. “Already cleared the whole thing with Perry. Officially, I’m on extended assignment to write a series of human interest articles about the Mountaintops in particular, and in general about being on the road and in the studio with a working band. Besides, he told me that too many bad people were mad at me for my role in taking down the Metro Gang, so I’m safer traveling with the Mountaintops than I am in Metropolis, at least for the time being.” He leaned down to kiss the side of her face and whispered, “I have something else to talk to you about when we have some real privacy. Oh, and I’m also supposed to protect Wanda Detroit and offer her a safe haven and a job at the Planet, assuming I ever find her.”

“Oh, you might be surprised where you might find her.” Then she leaned back and slapped his muscular chest. “And don’t you dare try to pull another stunt like that on me or I’ll clobber you!” She turned to face Connie, who had wisely backed up out of range. “And you, you Miss Universe never-be! Making me think he wasn’t coming when you knew all the time he was on the bus! I’ll get you for this, your traitor! You like snakes or frogs in your bed?”

Connie’s eyebrows lifted like battle flags. “Oh, no, girl, you start that stuff again and I’ll make your life totally miserable!”

“Yeah? How do you intend to perform that Amazonian feat?”

“That’s too easy. I’ll just tell every audience we have that our delicious sound man is straight, single, lonely, and looking for love in all the wrong places. I guarantee you he won’t be able to beat off the girls with three baseball bats and a two-by-four.”

Lois’s jaw dropped. “You wouldn’t dare!”

Connie leaned into Lois’ face. “If it keeps the amphibians and reptiles out of my bed, you bet your chromatic tuner I would!”

They stood glaring at one another for a long moment, then both women laughed and embraced. Lois pushed back and said, “You’re so evil, Connie!”

Connie bumped Lois’s shoulder with a loose fist. “What are

friends for, anyway? Someone in this band needs to be in a relationship that works. With him around you're going to be more fun, too. You should have seen your face light up when you got a good look at him. Besides, I figure with Clark around as a bodyguard, we won't have to worry about getting hit on by all those drunks and bums."

Clark leaned his chin over Lois's shoulder from behind and put one arm around her waist. "As long as you all understand that it's Lois' body that I'll be guarding most enthusiastically."

Lois leaned back into his solid warmth. "Don't worry, Clark, they all understand." She turned and faced him. "You're mine and they'll have to get their own guys. Assuming, of course, that they can."

"You just make all the rehearsals and meetings on time, Sis," Lucy called out. "Sucking on Clark's face is no excuse for being late."

Lois smiled warmly at her sister. "Punky, I don't need an excuse for that." She grinned at Clark and said, "Let's give them something to talk about." Then, to a feminine chorus of catcalls and whistles, she kissed him with great enthusiasm and purpose.

She barely felt a tap on her shoulder, then Connie said, "Lois, we're ready to go. It's your turn to drive."

Clark's mouth formed a grin against hers. She pulled away just far enough to speak. "No way, Connie, I just switched shifts with Sham."

"Huh," said Shamika. "I guess I better get this rig rollin' or we ain't going nowhere." She shoved Lois on the shoulder as she passed by. "You just go back to playin' tonsil hockey with the big boy, you lazy thang."

"If you insist." Her arms wrapped even tighter around his neck. "It's a tough job, but somebody's got to do it." She pressed her lips to his for a long moment, then pulled back and glared at him. "And nobody else better try doing my job for me."

He grinned. "Don't worry. I'm a one-musician man."

"One at a time, you mean?"

His smile softened. "One per lifetime. And you've already filled my quota for this entire lifetime."

She leaned into his deep chest again. "For every lifetime, Clark. Every one of them."

"I love you, Lois Lane."

"And I love you, Clark Kent."

This is gonna be such a great trip, she mused.

THE END