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# TRIPLE THREAT

*Lois Lane*

GWENDA  
BOND

SWITCH  
PRESS

## CHAPTER 1

**“You’re smiling like your world domination is nigh,”**  
Maddy said.

“Always,” I said as I fell into step beside her on the bustling sidewalk.

This time my world-domination smile was because I’d spotted our *Scoop* colleagues James and Devin waiting in front of the fancy old movie theater up ahead, as prompt as I’d known James would be.

It was a beautiful spring evening in Metropolis and a group of us were converging uptown for the first showing of *Madwoman*, a biopic about my hero Nellie Bly and her early days of groundbreaking journalistic exposés. I was determined to do my part for its opening weekend success. Support the things you love with your dollars . . . and make your friends

support them too. Especially when journalism is involved. This was my motto. Or one of them, anyway.

Maddy led a hearty crew that also included her perfectly coiffed twin sister Melody, Maddy's paint-spattered boyfriend Dante, and our gaming-happy friend Anavi. James had volunteered to get to the theater early to procure tickets. I'd needed to stop by the *Scoop* offices en route. I had a feature to file about how boys could know when they were being creepy and, um, well, *stop* being creepy. It had been inspired by a topic on the upstart online gossip hub Loose Lips and a long thread by guys who were wondering whether they were part of the problem. Our boss Perry White hated Loose Lips' crowdsourced news style, but we'd found ideas for several stories there—and just not revealed the source of our inspiration to him.

"You got the tickets, right?" I asked James by way of greeting as we met in front of the old-school marquee. He was tall, glossy-haired and -toothed, and born with a silver spoon but also a sense of fairness and a good heart.

Devin said, "Is that what he was supposed to do? I think he forgot." His afro was getting a little longer, and today he wore a T-shirt with a nerd-cool graphic of wolves and dragons.

My eyes narrowed at James, but he reached into his pocket and fanned out white ticket stubs. "Very funny, Dev," he said. "You're risking my life and limb. Here they are. Although I think we may be the only people at this showing."

I started to speak, but Maddy laughed and said, "Wait, Lois, let me guess what you're going to say." She tossed her head to get a lock of hot-pink-streaked hair out of her face. Her T-shirt

read *Her Royal Shyness*—it was, as always, for a fake band she made up, though only I knew that. But lately she hadn't been shy at all.

"Let's hear it, then," I said, crossing my arms.

"That's because people are barbarians," Maddy declared.

Anavi and Melody were talking to each other about something else. But I looked over to find Dante glancing back and forth as he followed our conversation. I felt a momentary pang for him, watching us quip at each other. Even after dating Maddy for months, he sometimes looked like he was standing outside a secret clubhouse.

I knew that feeling. In fact, I knew it much better than the feeling of being inside the clubhouse. I still understood being alone far better than I understood having good grades *and* a job that was a true calling *and* friends *and* a long-distance friend-who-was-more-than-a-friend. My family had moved to Metropolis at the beginning of the school year, and in the months since, it had become home sweet home, something I'd never experienced before. Soon we'd be out of school for the summer, free to spend every day working at the *Scoop*.

"People *are* barbarians," I said. Seeing "the true story of Nellie Bly" in little letters below the title on the marquee filled me with what could only be described as glee. "At least ones who don't appreciate Nellie. Everybody pay James back."

I passed James some money and so did the others. In exchange, he handed over our tickets. He didn't need the money, but it was the principle of the thing. James's family had lost some of their wealth to legal fees for his dad, but they

were starting to recover. His dad was running in the emergency mayoral election set for next month, the former bogus corruption conviction against him expunged (thanks to us and the story we'd managed to get six months ago).

We proceeded into the theater, and Anavi noticed me eyeing the concession stand. "Would you like to split an assortment of refreshments?" she asked.

Trust Anavi to use a word like refreshments instead of snacks—she was a former spelling bee champ. "If you're talking about the giant tub of popcorn I'm about to buy, then yes," I said.

The others got candy and drinks too, and then we made our way down the grand aisles. Sure, it wasn't a stadium-seating theater, but it was the nicest one I'd ever been in. There was a vaulted ceiling with mosaic detail, and velvet lined the walls and the seats.

Maddy selected a row halfway down. When Dante started to go in first, she stopped him. "Girls in this row, and you boys can sit behind us," she said.

He raised his eyebrows. Was it me or had her tone been strained?

Usually Maddy and Dante were on the same wavelength; it was the kind of sweet that bordered on nausea-inducing—not that I could talk, given the way I was with SmallvilleGuy.

Dante stepped back around Maddy with a shrug and dropped a kiss on her cheek.

James watched all this, then moved aside to let Dante in the boys' row. Months ago, James had revealed to me that he had

developed the world's largest crush on Maddy. She'd long carried a torch for him, but she had just met Dante. So I'd talked James into not doing anything about his feelings for Maddy. Wrong timing. I had no idea whether he continued to pine, and his expression told me nothing.

We sat down. I took a spot between Maddy and Anavi and almost dropped the popcorn when my phone buzzed in my pocket. "Hold this," I said to Maddy, thrusting the salty, buttery deliciousness at her so I could get to my phone.

Given that all my Metropolis friends were around me, there was only one person this could be.

**SmallvilleGuy:** *Did you make it?*

**SkepticGirl1:** *Yes. It hasn't started yet. Wish you were here.*

**SmallvilleGuy:** *Me too. Always. I wanted to let you know I won't be able to meet later in the game—Bess needs some TLC. Vet's coming over.*

"Oh no," I muttered.

"What?" Maddy asked, and I glanced over at her.

"Oh, just Bess the cow's pregnancy," I explained. "She's having a tough one."

Maddy bit her lip, obviously to keep in laughter.

"I'm ignoring you," I said.

**SkepticGirl1:** *Crossing my fingers. We'll talk tomorrow?*

**SmallvilleGuy:** *Miss you until then. xo*

"I'd make fun of you, but that expression on your face is too cute," Maddy said, shoveling a handful of popcorn into her mouth.

"I'm keeping my silence on this one," Anavi said.

Melody leaned over from Anavi's other side. "You still haven't met this guy in person?"

"Shhh," I said, grateful for the dimming of the theater lights. I retrieved the popcorn from Maddy. "The movie's starting."

"Saved by the cinema," Devin said behind me.

No, we hadn't met yet. And I still didn't know his actual name. But I felt like we knew everything else about each other—everything else that mattered. We'd gotten closer and closer over the past months. Which meant the physical distance between us was sometimes downright painful.

The movie proved to be perfectly cast and was heart-thumpingly exciting. I knew Nellie made it safely out of every situation to write her exposés. But I still held my breath when she was being examined by the doctors so she could infiltrate Blackwell Island for her famous story, which revealed the terrible conditions in which the facility's mentally ill patients lived. When she posed as a factory girl, my heart swelled with sadness at the exploitation she observed.

I felt almost dazed when we emerged into the night two and a half hours later. "Please give that movie every Oscar," I said. "If any of you didn't like it, don't tell me."

Everyone laughed. "It was great," Maddy said, lifting her hand to push back a strand of hair just as Dante reached for her hand.

Weird.

"Anyone want to ride-share?" James asked.

The others demurred, but Devin nodded. "That'd be great. Lois?" he asked.

I should have said yes, but I wanted to walk to the subway alone. I needed time to process my thoughts. "I'll see you guys at school tomorrow."

We waved and I gave Maddy and Anavi a hug, then exchanged a nod with Melody. I saluted the boys, and as everyone split off into separate directions, I waited on the sidewalk's edge for honking, merging traffic to clear so I could cross.

Given how heavy it was, it'd be awhile. I didn't mind standing here, waiting, though. After that movie, I had things on my mind.

It had left me with a distinct craving. I wanted another *big* story. Nellie Bly didn't wait for them to come to her. The last six months had been good, and we'd done some important work. But none of it front-page-of-the-*Daily-Planet* level important.

Something I'd learned from the whole big story clearing the ex-Mayor was that the little stories mattered too. I wasn't above them. And I had needed to learn to be more patient.

But . . . bringing down the bad guys? Restoring a good guy's honor? Helping people? That was heady stuff.

I missed it.

And, okay, I enjoyed having my name on the front page of the *Daily Planet*. Little stories didn't end up there as often.

We'd been watching for jerky mad scientist type Dabney Donovan to resurface. The evil doctor had gotten away clean after helping set up James's dad and endangering Maddy's sister in the process. There'd been no leads. He avoided tech networks like the plague, preferring paper records. Devin set up searches for him online anyway, and he had a regular trawl looking for vacant buildings that shouldn't be draining power and other oddities. So far, nothing. We needed to find Donovan and figure out how to take him down.

Suddenly, I wished I was going to the office instead of home. Nellie had inspired me. We shouldn't be waiting around for Donovan to reemerge. I preferred to chase my stories, not the other way around.

Then there was the whole mess related to the person who went by the mysterious online handle TheInventor. He ran a message board called Strange Skies, catering to fans of weird, unexplained phenomena. It was where I had first encountered my online friend-who-was-more-than-a-friend, SmallvilleGuy.

Of my friends, Devin was the only one who knew most of this; he'd even met SmallvilleGuy in *Worlds War Three*, a real-sim holoset game Dev was super into. The game was also where SmallvilleGuy and I frequently hung out together these days.

I'd asked for Devin's help to track TheInventor's movements online, but he'd never been able to manage it. The last time he tried was a couple of months ago now.

What Devin didn't know was that I suspected TheInventor

of working with members of a secret government task force who were hunting for someone I owed my life to—a certain flying man. And Devin didn't know that I also suspected one of the people on said task force was my dad.

But I needed to make absolutely certain TheInventor was playing double agent before I pressed the issue with SmallvilleGuy. Because SmallvilleGuy trusted him. Completely. And SmallvilleGuy didn't trust easily.

I hated keeping secrets from SmallvilleGuy. This, despite the fact he continued to keep his real identity a secret from me.

But I hadn't told SmallvilleGuy what I thought might be happening. Not yet. Or why I preferred meeting in the game to chatting on software designed by TheInventor. Not until I had proof that TheInventor might be willing to put us in danger. Or until I had proof that he had already put us in danger.

The street finally calmed enough for me to chance crossing, and so I did.

When I made it to the other side, I looked back at the theater and noticed a boy staring straight at me. He was short and too skinny for his frame, shoulders and elbows jutting out beneath a faded T-shirt. He had floppy brown hair on the right side of his head and a smooth shave on the other.

He lifted his hand in a sarcastic beauty-queen-style wave.

A horn honked and distracted me for a split second, and when I turned my head back, he was gone. No sign of him anywhere on the block. He had just . . . vanished.

*Great, I thought, now I'm seeing things.*

I took out my phone and sent Devin a text. The least I could do tonight was pursue a lead on something.

*Can you give tagging my Strange Skies pal TheInventor another shot? Maybe he's been lured into a false sense of security.*

Typing the words, I thought maybe they also applied to me over the last few months. And I vowed: no more.

## CHAPTER 2

**After my last class** the next day, I finished stowing my books in my locker and shut the door. I turned around and discovered Maddy standing behind me. Her T-shirt today was for Passive Attack. “So?” she asked.

I blew on my fingernails in a universal sign for success. “I aced that bio test. *A-plus.*”

“Should make your dad happy—and Principal Butler.” Maddy said it dryly. She was fully aware of how little I cared about the loathsome principal’s regard for me.

James walked up and joined us. “Hey,” he said, “I’m on my way to the *Scoop*. Anyone want to come along?”

I did want to, but I couldn’t. I had an impromptu date with SmallvilleGuy—he’d said he had “significant news” and

refused to divulge more. No way I could wait until after hitting the office with *that* kind of lead-up, desperate to find another big story or not. Besides, Devin had also sent me a text after lunch saying that he'd made progress on his task.

Maddy nodded to James. "Sure, I'm headed there too. I have an album to review."

"Great," James said. "Let's go."

"Don't worry about me," I said.

"Um . . . why?" James asked, hesitating.

"Not that we would," Maddy said. She considered. "Unless you were doing something crazy dangerous. So I guess that means we would."

"Haha, hilarious. Have I done anything crazy dangerous lately?" I answered the question before they could. "I have not."

It was the truth. Winter had passed in what most people would describe as calm but I would call boring. Well, *almost* boring. I could feel my cheeks getting a little hot. There was one person in my life who was the opposite of boring.

Always.

"I'm meeting up with Devin here about something, and then I have somewhere to be . . . I'm not coming by the office today. So go ahead without me."

"She has an online *date* with her mystery boy," Maddy said. "That's what she means."

"I could tell by her air of glazed euphoria," James said. He and Maddy grinned at each other.

"I need to hit my locker before we go," Maddy said.

I heard my name and turned to see Devin at the end of the hall near the main exit.

"That's my cue. I'll see you guys later." Leaving the others behind, I walked toward Devin.

Of my fellow *Scoop* staffers, Devin was more like me than James and Maddy were. Except unlike me, he had crazy good tech skills. I hoped he'd have some info on TheInventor.

"I got him this time," Devin said. He pushed open the door and held it for me. He had on a slouchy gray T, jeans, and cool sneakers. "Fifth time's the charm."

"You really think so?" I asked Devin as we left school. As usual, I wore jeans and my boots.

I kept my voice down, because we were still surrounded by our classmates. Not that anyone was listening. It was the post-last-bell exodus and no one was much in the mood to linger. School buses pulled away from the curb.

"I know so," Devin said. "And this worm's so sleek, he won't even notice it's there. It should capture his activity so we know who he's in contact with and what he's sharing."

"Excellent," I said.

"You going to tell me what we're looking for?"

"You'll know it when you see it," I told him. "We're looking for anything suspicious."

"That's . . . nonspecific," he said.

I shrugged. That was as specific as I was willing to get for the time being.

Devin was a good enough friend to agree to help me out without knowing the full story. We stopped on the sidewalk

down the block from school, the post-bell exit traffic starting to thin out.

I almost did a double take when I spotted a guy on the other side of the street watching us. The thing was, he looked an awful lot like the boy outside the theater last night. Skinny, check. Floppy hair, check. But he turned away before I could get a good look at his face.

*Weird.* But it didn't seem possible the same guy from last night had turned up at school.

I shifted to face Devin. "You coming to the office?" he asked.

"Not tonight," I said, biting my lip against a smile.

"Oh, I get it. You have a date," he said, teasing.

"Sort of." Apparently I *was* that transparent. But I was also grinning.

"Go on," he said, serious again. "I'll ping you if I see anything . . . unusual."

I should have taken off, but I hesitated.

"What is it?" Devin asked.

"Just . . . speaking of unusual, any sign of Donovan lately?" I mentally crossed my fingers.

"Nada on that front," he said. "I'd have led with it if there was. Why?"

"He can't ghost forever," I said, hoping it was true. "I think we need to come up with a plan to track him down."

Devin nodded. "Okay, but why the sudden rush?"

"It's not sudden. I just feel like we've been a little lazy about it."

"If you say so," Devin said with a small frown.

"I do." I thought he might argue, and I didn't want to explain that Nellie Bly had opened my eyes anew to what I *should* be doing. So I waved. "See you."

He opened his mouth, but then just shook his head and lifted his hand in goodbye.

We headed off in separate directions, my boots thudding on the sidewalk as I hurried to catch the subway home. I wove through bodies on the sidewalk like a native Metropolitan.

"Ow!" Someone knocked into me hard, sending my breath out of my lungs and forcing me to the sidewalk. Dad's lesson about safe landings during his self-defense training was the only thing that kept me from catching myself with my hands and destroying my wrists. Instead, I redirected, and my butt collided hard with the concrete.

I looked up to see who'd knocked me over.

It was the boy who'd been watching me. And he was definitely the same one from yesterday. He paused on the sidewalk ahead, his head crooked back toward me. He was so thin that his cheeks had hollows.

He *winked* at me.

I blinked at him in stunned confusion. Then the backpack he wore caught my eye. It—unlike the rest of him—was in perfect condition. There was a symbol on the back, a round logo that struck me as familiar. I squinted to get a better look, and noticed another odd thing as he started to move away. His feet—they appeared to be coated in some kind of silver armor. Also in pristine condition.

Then he really took off.

I scrambled to my non-armored feet as the boy put on a burst of speed. It was some burst. Whatever the armor was, it did the opposite of weigh him down. He ran so fast he almost blurred as he dodged between people on the sidewalk.

The passersby reacted with startled steps back and exclamations. So I wasn't hallucinating this.

I went after him as fast I could, which wasn't anywhere near fast enough. The speed he used didn't seem . . . possible. *No one* ran that fast.

I lost sight of him as he hung a right at the corner. When I reached the end of the block, I turned and saw him at the next intersection. Then he was gone again, taking a hard left.

Was he *letting* me follow him?

"Not such a quick thinker, if you are," I said, jogging ahead.

When I reached the end of that block, though, I really had lost him. The next street was quieter, and I scanned it hard in case I was missing something. There were awnings over shops, some buildings that seemed unoccupied, and trees dotting the sidewalk. A repurposed payphone booth covered in mural art sat near the corner. There were only a few people out on the sidewalks.

None of them was the floppy-haired silver-foot with the backpack.

"Is everything all right?" a woman's voice asked. Outrageously glam, she stood next to the Don't Walk sign, seemingly comfortable in skyscraper heels and perfect makeup with her hair piled on top of her head and a high-necked dress

that I'd bet cost a thousand dollars if it cost a penny. There was a musical lilt to her voice, an accent I couldn't place.

*News story alert. He wasn't just leading me. He's a lead.*

"Everything's perfect," I said.

"Glad to hear it," she said, then crossed the street, though the light hadn't changed yet.

I considered continuing up the street to see if I could find any trace of the rude speedy dude. I even gave it a few more steps. But he was nowhere to be seen. I was alone, and I was in a hurry to get home. Continuing this way would move me in the opposite direction.

Still, I unearthed my phone from the outside pocket of my messenger bag and tapped out a group chat to Devin, James, and Maddy: *Got a lead on a story. Let's talk at school.*

The boy had showed up and drawn my attention on purpose. I was sure of that. I had his scent now, and I wanted a closer look at that backpack decal. I also owed him for knocking me down.

And I had a feeling he'd be back soon enough.

\* \* \*

I unlocked the front door of our brownstone and swung it open just as my phone buzzed. I fumbled for it—though I was almost certain it'd be SmallvilleGuy teasing me about being late, as usual—and barreled right into Dad.

"That's my girl," he said, catching my arms to steady me. "Always in a rush."

He wore his dress uniform and Lucy was behind him, also

in fancier clothes than normal. Where he was shiny medals and ribbons, she was sedate baby-goth in a black dress.

Mom came down the stairs and was wearing a dress too. Though hers wasn't fancy. In a slate gray sheath with a jacket over top, she was the height of professionalism. Her blond hair was smoothed back into a low ponytail.

"Where are you guys going?" I asked. It would be just my luck to have blanked on a family obligation.

Mom answered. "They're going to an airfield just outside the city for a reception. I'm going to teach my first class. Do I look okay?"

She stood for inspection, nerves apparent in the slight trembling of her arms as she held them out to each side of herself.

*Oh, right.* This was Mom's first night teaching at a local college. She'd picked up a double masters before she and Dad got married, intending to teach college classes on English and/or Art History. But we'd moved around too much for her to do more than pick up a session here and there over the years. She'd always longed for the front of a classroom.

Dad smiled at her. "You look great, *Professor Lane*, and you're going to do great."

"I hope so."

"Yeah, knock them dead, Mom," I said. "Or whatever the teaching version of 'Break a leg' is."

"I think it's just 'Break a leg,' sweetheart," Mom said, but she sounded less nervous. She shouldered her purse, and then glanced down at my clothes. Okay, so my jeans were a little the worse for my tumble on the street. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. I, um, tripped leaving school." It wasn't a complete falsehood.

Dad shook his head. "Try not to break anything while we're out."

"I'll be back in a couple of hours," Mom said, heading off any bickering between me and Dad.

"But lock up behind us anyway," Dad added.

*As if I wouldn't have.*

Things were strained between me and Dad these days. Well, more strained than usual. The weird undercurrent traced all the way back to my last big story. Whether it was my fault or his didn't really matter. We were both aware of it, but neither of us had mentioned it or tried to address it. We just sniped at each other more than usual. Christmas had been particularly awful. I guessed he thought the weirdness would eventually go away on its own and normalcy would make a triumphant return. I worried more that things between us wouldn't ever feel normal again.

The three of them left together, and, as directed, I locked the door behind them. My phone was buzzing again. And my stomach growled. But that could wait.

I checked my phone. It was *SmallvilleGuy* messaging me in our app.

**SmallvilleGuy:** *ETA soon, or did something come up? Or did you forget about me?;*)

**SkepticGirl1:** *Be right there. Race you to the game.*

**SkepticGirl1:** *(Never.)*

I bounded up the stairs and went straight to my desk. In smooth sequence, I picked my holoset out of my desk drawer and then tucked it over my ear with one hand while I stretched out my other arm to close and lock the door. A little paranoia never hurt anyone. Much.

I settled on my bed and pressed the button to power the holoset on, finally taking a breath. A spray of lights focused into the familiar, if ever-changing, landscape of *Worlds War Three*. Currently there was a storm-gray sky with scudding orange clouds above Devin's newly reconstructed castle. The turreted tower known as the Lois Annex, where SmallvilleGuy and I usually hung out, loomed in front of me.

A pretty, red-scaled dragon flew overhead.

A familiar form split off from the dragon and flew down to land by my side. This was one person I'd never mistake for another, here in the game or anywhere. Lanky, with black hair and light green-tinged skin, he was my favorite resident glasses-wearing alien: SmallvilleGuy.

"I see how it is," I said with a fake pout. "I take a few extra seconds and I'm replaced by a dragon."

"Never," he said, grinning. "She doesn't have much personality, being computer-generated."

"I knew it." I kicked the ground with a bare foot. Devin had made my character in here an elf princess; I was pointy-eared, scantily clad, and shoeless. "You like me for my personality."

He laughed. He had a good laugh.

"That's why I like you too," I said.

Our eyes connected, and our gazes held.

*I can't believe I say this stuff out loud now.*

We'd still never stood across from each other like this in real life. The real-sim tech might fool our brains into feeling like this was actually happening, might make my heart beat harder in my chest and my palms feel sweaty. And our relationship *was* real. At least, I was almost certain it was. But this *place* was a simulation. That's what the sim part of the name was short for.

When SmallvilleGuy reached out and offered me his hand, I slipped mine into it. The sensation of my hand enveloped in his felt real enough that—as usual—my brain was utterly convinced.

"How's Bess?" I asked. First things first.

SmallvilleGuy smiled and swung my hand. "Better. Nellie Bly is refusing to leave her side."

Nellie—named for my hero—was no longer a dainty baby calf, but I still considered her the world's cutest adolescent cow. In a few more months, she'd have a little brother or sister.

"Good . . . Sooo, what's the big surprise?" I asked. "Can you turn into a dragon now?"

His last surprise for me had been that he could fly in the game and take me with him—which led to a kiss with our feet off the ground. Maybe this surprise would be kiss-worthy too.

"No," he said, suddenly shy and studying my fingers in his. "It's not about the game. It's a real-life thing."

“Oh?” My heart picked up speed. I hadn’t expected something real-life big. I couldn’t decode his expression.

“So . . .” he said. “My birthday’s coming up in a couple of months.”

He took a step, and I let him lead me across the grass toward the Lois Annex.

“You’ll have to tell me when it is so I can, um, get you something.” Though as I said it, I knew that was impossible. I didn’t know his address. I couldn’t send him anything. “Never mind,” I blurted.

“No,” he said, quick. “I’m not letting you off the hook. I definitely want that present.”

He steered me through the arched entrance into our turret, and I placed my other hand in his, the two of us staring into each other’s eyes again. I felt like I was floating before our feet even left the ground. He flew us up to a ledge with a bench and a window that overlooked the hillside. The dragon was still visible off in the distance, sailing through the gray sky.

“Um, okay,” I said. “But . . . how?”

“Telling you this is more embarrassing than I imagined.” He stared out the window, avoiding looking at me. “I feel a little goofy.”

“You imagined telling me this? Whatever *this* is?” I gently hit his arm. “And you’re feeling goofy? I love it already. Spill the details. You’re murdering me with this suspense.”

He turned to face me again, and my breath caught in my throat for a moment. I hoped he didn’t notice. I didn’t want to spoil whatever his surprise was. But he was looking at me with

such intensity. It legitimately short-circuited my brain and my nervous system along with it.

“What is it?” I asked, breathless.

“My birthday’s coming up in a couple of months, and my parents have, uh, noticed how into all things Metropolis I am,” he said. “Since you moved there, especially. And you know I mentioned you to my mom a while back.”

He paused. The pause lengthened.

“Still being murdered,” I said. “Possibly dying here.”

He smiled, a shyness to it. “They gave me a choice of what I wanted for my birthday. A new laptop—”

“Oh, that’s great,” I said, happy for him. He’d spent the money he’d been saving for a new computer on a holoset to help me out, and I felt guilty about that. Even though it had also produced the nice side effect of allowing us to meet in the game.

“As I was saying . . .” He smiled again, still nervous. Still shy. It made me like him even more. “They gave me a choice. A new laptop *or* a trip to Metropolis.” He paused again. “I chose the trip.”

I knew my eyes were wide. My mouth had dropped open. I closed it. “Does this mean . . .”

“It does,” he said. “It means I’m coming to Metropolis and we finally get to see each other. Together, in real life.”

“In real life.” I echoed his words, too overwhelmed to find my own. Finally, I managed to ask, oh-so-articulately, “Really?”

“Really.” He reached over and gathered my other hand in his again. I clung to his hands, as if to convince myself this was

truly happening. “And there’s more to the surprise. I’m going to tell you my name. It’s—”

“No!” I blurted, before I could think better of it. “Don’t tell me now.”

He arched his brows, puzzled. Who could blame him? I’d asked him nightly for more than two years.

“It’s just, I’d rather wait.” I felt my lips curve into a smile. “I want you to tell me when we meet. For real.”

Yes, I’d asked him over and over again for his name. I’d reassured him he could trust me. But now that it was a certainty, I wanted it to be when we were *really* across from each other. I needed to save some part of our meeting each other for truly *meeting*.

“Whatever you want,” he said, at last. “But . . . I mean. You’re sure?”

Tempting, but . . . if TheInventor was as tech savvy as I thought, he could have figured out some way to monitor us in here too. Sure, the task force had been keeping a low profile. We hadn’t had any close calls in the past few months.

But I didn’t want to risk it. In person was the safest way.

“I will probably hate myself later, because you know I’m a total snoop. But yes. I’m sure.”

“Okay then.” His thumb rubbed across my hand, back and forth. “You know what I’m not sure about?”

*That we’ll like each other in real life? Oh god, did that have to be my first thought? What is wrong with me?*

“Enlighten me.”

“That I can wait two more months.”

My heart might as well have leapt out of my chest and landed at his feet. I leaned in to give him a quick kiss. I rested my avatar’s forehead against his.

“It does seem like an awfully long time.” We smiled at each other, our in-game faces close, our real-world bodies states apart.

For now.

“Oh, wow, I almost forgot,” I said, pulling back. “I’m still determined to track down Donovan, but I think I found my next story on the way home. I ran into this guy who’s super-fast.”

That straightened him up. “What do you mean, super-fast?”

“Like he ran faster than any normal person should be able to. And actually, he ran into me. He knocked me down on the street.” I leaned back against the stone wall. “And it was on purpose. I saw him last night outside the movie theater too. After he barreled into me he took off, but then he kept slowing down. It seemed like it was so I could follow him. He had some weird armor on his feet and a backpack with a logo on it. I couldn’t make it out, though.”

“Hold up.” SmallvilleGuy blinked at me. “He knocked you down? Are you all right?”

He touched my arm carefully, like he could examine me for injuries even though we weren’t anywhere close to each other.

“Stop worrying, worrier. He just knocked the wind out of

me, maybe a bruise or two on my—” I bit my lip before I could say something embarrassing. “Um. My back.”

He reached up and touched my cheek.

“You still showed up to meet me after that?” He sounded surprised. “You didn’t run straight to the *Scoop*?”

“No. I came here. And it was worth it.” I wondered about something, though. “How fast can a regular person go, anyway?”

He didn’t even hesitate. “About twenty-eight miles per hour—but that’s not regular-person speed. That’s a professional running record. Most people run eight miles per hour or so.”

“Gold star for sports trivia,” I said. “Anyway, you know I plan to go all out to find him.”

He looked back to me. “Of course. But be careful, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.”

As usual, that was the only promise I could make and have any chance of keeping it.

## CHAPTER 3

**I chomped down** on a bite of chewy bagel, hunching my shoulders to prevent being jostled by the other passengers on the subway train Monday morning. Maddy had woken me with a text first thing, saying she’d reserve our study room in the library so we could huddle before school to talk about this new story I’d happened on. I’d rushed out my front door with my bagel clutched in a napkin.

Determined to be on time, I’d even made a mental note of what she’d set as our next password: Harriet Tubman. Who, Maddy had informed me, held among her many other excellent accomplishments being a female spy during the Civil War. Maddy had developed a minor obsession for lady spies, which I heartily approved of.

I’d gone to see *Madwoman* again on Saturday and kept my

eyes peeled for the boy who'd knocked me down. No sign of him—not yet anyway. I hadn't slept well all weekend. Every night it took me forever to even close my eyes instead of staring at the ceiling. Imagining SmallvilleGuy coming here and what it would be like to breathe the same air and really look into his eyes was too distracting. What if that chemistry I thought of as “us” didn't exist in person?

When I finally did sleep, I'd dreamed about running down the stairs in Dabney Donovan's old lab headquarters, footsteps echoing behind me. I heard the last and only words Donovan ever said to me: “You will never see me again.”

And my most frequent nightmare had reappeared right before I woke, the one where I watched, helpless, as the flying man tumbled from the sky.

The flying man had been my introduction to the concept that there were things in the world that defied explanation. Dad and I had spotted a giant rock tower when we were driving through Kansas late at night, and we'd gotten out to investigate—only to have it collapse.

We'd have died there, crushed by enormous boulders, if the flying man hadn't saved us. He'd managed to gather the rocks before they could hit, and then disappeared—faster than the boy I'd seen the day before, to be sure, and faster than the supposed limit of human speed. Neither Dad nor I mentioned it again after that night, but it had changed how both of us saw the world.

I'd posted on Strange Skies about it and SmallvilleGuy had

sent me a private message assuring me what I'd witnessed *was* real—though he couldn't say how he knew or tell me who he was.

Dad, on the other hand, had started a top-secret government search for the man we'd seen.

The train slowed, and I finished off the bagel and balled up my napkin. The sliding doors parted and I stepped off. School was four long blocks from this stop. I paused at a trash can, and a flash of motion snagged my attention.

A male figure darted past me and up the steps *fast*. Eerily fast, like that boy. His heels flashed with silver, just like his armor. He had a backpack slung over one shoulder again, too.

“Wait!” I called out, rushing between people to go after him.

His head ducked back in at the top of the stairwell. Floppy brown hair, hollow cheeks. Yep, it was him again.

He shot me a mocking grin. “How about you catch up instead?” he asked, and then was gone again.

People on the stairs frowned and grumbled, but got out of my way as I pounded up the steps. When I got to the sidewalk, he was fifty feet up the busy block, standing in wait. He waved at me with that same mocking grin.

This guy was not endearing himself to me.

I shouldered my messenger bag across my chest and launched into motion. I ran as hard as I could, weaving through the crowd. He stayed right where he was, a still point as I approached . . .

I was almost there, would reach him in moments. He hadn't moved. I considered slowing before I collided with him. Three more strides to go—and then he took off.

"Can't catch me," he called.

"What are you, the freaking gingerbread man?" I muttered, panting and surging forward again, with no hope of keeping up.

I was no expert, but he was definitely outpacing the average person's speed when he burst into movement. I couldn't be sure about whether he was faster than the upper end of the range. Because he was toying with me. He'd erupt into speed and put on a serious lead, then slow down again. He *was* letting me keep up with him. Just as he had the day before, right up until he'd decided to lose me.

*Wait*, I thought, my boots slapping the pavement hard as I slowed. He was leading me somewhere. Should I go along with that? I'd promised SmallvilleGuy I'd try for caution. My friends at the *Scoop* didn't know about this guy yet. Which meant no one would figure out for a while where I'd disappeared to, should I disappear.

But I didn't have to risk anything to keep going. I knew right where we were. School was just around the next corner.

"You're losing me," his sing-song voice called. It came from closer than I expected.

He'd run back to me, and stopped a few feet away. His backpack was still slung over a single shoulder. I lunged and grabbed the free strap at the same moment that he started to run again.

"Get off," he said.

"I'd rather not." I tightened my grip.

He grimaced and lunged away. His momentum went one way, mine the other—and I managed to pull his backpack off.

"Give that back," he said over his shoulder. He was moving slower now. Much slower. Slow enough for me to keep up.

"I don't think I feel like it," I said.

School came into view as I clutched the backpack and pursued him. It had to be after first bell by now—so much for not being late—but the sidewalk wasn't empty.

Then I saw something that made my breath catch.

Maddy, James, and Devin were out front. Maddy was on the ground, James helping her up. Devin was climbing to his feet, having been downed too apparently, and seemed to be asking a question of the three unfamiliar people standing across from them, two girls and a guy. Devin assumed a defensive crouch, his fists up.

One girl wore silver gloves that reminded me of speedy boy's armor. A second girl had some sort of silvery mask around her eyes, molded to her face like a second skin. The boy had . . . spiky silver wings extending from his shoulder blades. They were all too thin, just like the boy who'd come after me.

I might not have recognized them, but I knew trouble when I spotted it. Whatever was going on here, well, it was trouble and then some.

"You want this back?" I asked the boy, speeding toward my

friends. “You tell me what this is about. Who are you? What are you up to?”

We reached the others.

“Lois!” Maddy said and held out a hand to me.

I stopped just in front of her, a friend and a shield, and held the boy’s backpack up high. The vantage finally gave me a better look at the logo on it.

The art style was interestingly detailed. The elements of the logo for Donovan’s lab—which was called Ismenios after the dragon that fought Cadmus—were present, the dragon and warrior facing off against each other. There was no name and the illustration style was different, but that didn’t matter.

The logo was enough to send me to an immediate conclusion. This *must* have something to do with mad scientist creep Dabney Donovan.

*Good. I’ve been looking for you.*

“Give that back,” the silver-footed boy said, joining his trio of friends.

“Not likely,” I said, unzipping the backpack with my free hand. It was remarkably light. “Wonder what’s in here.”

The girl with the silver armor molded over her hands stepped in front of speedy boy protectively, and then came toward me. She was average height, curly brown hair. She could have been pictured next to *ordinary* in the dictionary—if not for her armored mitts. I’d never seen anything like that metal . . . if it was metal.

James appeared at my side. “Look out. She’s strong.”

“She can’t be that strong.” There were no bulging biceps to

be seen beneath her loose, faded T-shirt when her hand came up to grab the backpack.

“What are you—” I started.

She lifted the backpack, and with it, my feet off the ground. I grappled inside the black canvas and came out with a folder. Remarkably Donovan-like. I’d seen plenty of folders like this—plain, manila folders—in the filing cabinets at his old office.

The girl plucked the backpack away from me, and James and Maddy caught me before I fell.

“Okay, maybe she is,” I said, disconcerted. “Deceiving looks, et cetera. I think it’s the armor.”

Maddy said, “Are you all right?”

“I’ll live.” I waved them off with my prize, the folder I’d liberated.

The crazy strong girl tossed the backpack to speedy, who pulled it back on. He used both straps this time.

But he didn’t ask for the folder back. And none of the others seemed inclined to try to take it. From what I could tell, it had been the only thing inside too.

*Interesting.*

A boy who could run faster than he should be able to. A girl who was stronger than seemed possible. I narrowed my eyes at the remaining two teens, a dark-skinned girl with a silver eye-mask and street clothes and a boy with weird spikes jutting up from his shoulders.

They all had that same lean, hungry vibe about them as the first guy. Their clothes were frayed at the edges.

Yet they all had some kind of high-tech armor on, too,

which seemingly gave them their abilities. And they had some sort of connection to Donovan. I felt not only like the universe was giving me a gift, but that it was exactly the gift I'd been waiting for.

Might as well be up front about things. "Who are you and what do you want with us? Donovan sent you," I said. "Why?"

The girl with the gloves spoke up. "It's not about who we are or what we want. You made enemies, Lois Lane."

I glanced at my friends. "Yeah, we know. Dabney Donovan. Where is he? He's not someone you want to mess around with. No matter what he's told you."

The girl frowned, and I'd swear there was a confused cast to her squint.

"I don't know what you think," the strong girl said. "Or care. We love our parents."

*What?*

"I love mine too," I said, "but that's a weird thing to say right now."

The girl spoke again. "They rescued us. They made us powerful."

"They who?" I asked. Was Donovan working with someone else again, another patron like Boss Moxie? "If Donovan's involved, it won't last. Whatever it is he did to you, there *will* be consequences, side effects to that gear you're wearing. There always are when Donovan's involved."

"Trust us on that," Maddy added.

Speedy boy laughed then. "Sounds like you've got more enemies than you know, and no clue what you're talking

about. We don't know any Donovan, we're here because we're Typhon."

That was a surprise.

Such a surprise, I didn't believe him, though I made a mental note of the word.

"Yeah, right." I tightened my grip on the folder. I hoped it had something in it besides his homework.

The door to the school opened, and the four of them looked at each other. "Bye now," the boy said. "We'll be seeing you soon."

The boy with the spiky wings embraced the strong girl. I gaped as the silver appendages on his shoulders pumped and he flew away with her. The other two ran, disappearing quickly around the corner.

I hesitated. Go after them or not?

And then I heard the worst possible voice to hear at a time like this . . . or at any time, frankly.

"Why, if it isn't my favorite reporting staff," Principal Butler said. "You're all late to school. And Ms. Lane, I do believe this is enough accumulated tardies to send you back to detention. Maybe you can convince me to overlook it, if you can explain what you're all doing out here."

I shuddered at the thought. Detention was as boring as boring got. Worse, it would get Dad on my back again. Plus, the *Scoopers* and I had a lot of business to discuss now. Serious business.

I tucked the folder into my messenger bag to keep Butler from getting his hands on it.

He walked down the steps to join us on the sidewalk. The fabric of his suit picked up a silver glint in the sunlight. Combined with his hair, he was peak Principal Shark today. He smiled, coolly, baring his sharky teeth.

Maddy rubbed her arm. “I, um, I got knocked down,” she said, speaking up. Her T-shirt today was for Riot Patrol. “Some guy and his friends attacked me. These three were just helping me.”

“Yeah,” Devin chimed in. “I saw the whole thing.”

“Me too,” James said. “Some random kids—I don’t think they go to school here.”

“No, I don’t think they do either,” I said. Maybe Butler could be useful in some way. “You’d better alert security to be on the lookout for them. They might try to sneak in.”

“Are you working on a new story?” Principal Butler asked, sounding eager and interested.

“We’re always working on a story,” I said.

This answer seemed to offend him. His lips pursed. “I presume this isn’t a game, Ms. Lane. James, at least, is trustworthy.”

I gave an affronted gasp. “You wound me.”

I wanted to roll my eyes. Maddy rolled hers, but only I could see that. Her face was still pale.

What had happened before I got here? I’d be dying until I could find out.

Also, dying to figure out what Dabney Donovan was doing that had given those teens powers with that silvery armor—and why they didn’t respond to his name. Why would they

risk being seen out in the open this way? Risk challenging us directly? Why had they let me keep the folder?

“Can we have a second to talk in private?” I asked. We were on moderately improved terms with Butler—no more Monday meetings for me—but this was a long shot on my part.

Butler’s lips curled into an indulgent smile. “Of course. After school’s out,” he said, “you can have as many as you want.”

So no collective confab, then. He waved toward the steps and the entry doors. “If no one needs to visit the nurse, then you’d best get on to class.”

There was no getting around it. We nodded and marched to his orders. He’d let me off without detention, so I knew better than to argue. I made like a good little soldier.

As soon as I could slip my phone from my bag, I sent a text to Maddy, James, and Devin.

*Let’s regroup at the Scoop offices after school. We should ride over together in case they come back.*

They surreptitiously checked their phones, and Maddy gave me a thumbs-up.

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I wasn’t able to examine the contents of the folder until third period. Even then I had to conceal it within the pages of my notebook to avoid getting busted. I wanted to begin formulating a plan before my friends and I met up after school.

My gut told me that guy’s wings were a new kind of flying mechanism, which wasn’t so hard to believe given the various

powers the others had. I hadn't seen any wings in Kansas, but then I hadn't seen much of my flying man at all. Still, I felt certain this was something else, something different.

I didn't know what to expect in the folder, but it certainly wasn't what I found.

The two items on top were hard copy clippings, neatly scissored out of the newspaper. They were my own stories that had run in the *Daily Planet*. A select compendium. And my name in the bylines was underlined in black marker.

The first major story I'd done, on Advanced Research Labs, Inc. CEO Steve "Dirtbag" Jenkins and his research experiment on the Warheads. Then the story about James's ex-mayor dad, the then-current mayor, and Boss Moxie.

I hadn't been able to write about Donovan's role in framing James's dad by making a clone of him, because it would have put Maddy's sister in danger. She'd been used in the cloning experiment, linked up with the double, who was now voluntarily in jail and who everyone else thought was James's dad's secret twin.

There was also a story by someone else: a profile of my dad and his military service. Another story detailed rumors about more funding being set aside for military research into advanced technology.

I slid that aside and went cold.

There was a picture of me, taken as I walked up a street. The background was as blurred as I was in focus, so it could have been on the way to school or home. It could have been taken anywhere, anytime. I shivered.

A hand landed on my shoulder. "Lois?"

I flinched, then gave a chagrined smile to Anavi, who stood next to me.

"Are you okay?" she asked. Anavi and I had been friends since my story on the Warheads. She had been the one targeted by the Warheads in the first place.

"Um, sure," I said.

Even though she didn't try to look at what was on my desk, I shut my notebook on the contents of the folder. No need to involve her in whatever this was or remind her of bad things in the past.

"I was concerned by your immobility," she said.

I frowned.

She paused. Then, "The bell rang, and everyone left except you. And me."

"Oh," I said, rising from the desk. "Thanks, lost in thought."

In worries, more like. What did it all mean? The fact the kid had this intel on him and I'd been able to get it from him? Had he *let* me steal it? If not, why hadn't he asked for it back?

He'd whined for the return of the backpack itself.

I needed to know if the others had said anything else to my friends that would illuminate the situation. The word that kid had used to describe them meant nada to me.

I slipped my phone out and typed a quick message into the chat app to SmallvilleGuy: *Does the word Typhon ring any bells for you?*

He wasn't in the app and probably wouldn't log in again

until after school. I put my phone away. Anavi watched me with amusement.

“You must be in preparations for an article,” she said.

“Seems that way. Don’t tell Butler—he was salivating about it this morning.”

“We’re not confidantes, so no problem. And in case you forgot, Nellie Bly, it’s lunch period,” Anavi said as we emerged into the crowded hallway.

“Good, I’m starving,” I said, but it was a lie.

For once, the only thing I was hungry for was knowledge. And finally taking down Donovan. That too.

## CHAPTER 4

I’d sent a text to Taxi Jack at the beginning of last period. So my trusty favorite cabbie and his many-ringed fingers waved at us from the curb as we fled the scene of school after last bell.

I surveyed the crowd of departing students around us, but saw no sign of the silver-armored misfits who’d attacked us earlier. That metal hadn’t resembled anything I’d ever seen or heard about. In fact, all I could say for sure is that it was *metallic-looking*. The way it had molded like a skin over feet and faces and hands, and even the way those spiky wings had moved so easily, meant it was flexible, though. Almost as if it was molten, though it clearly wasn’t. Otherwise at least one of us would’ve been burned. I wondered if anyone had touched it.

James opened the back door of the cab for Maddy and

Devin. Then he got in too, leaving me to climb into the front seat.

“How’s it going, Jack?” I asked.

“You tell me—we headed somewhere dangerous today? What’s up?” Taxi Jack asked, the eagerness in his voice surprising.

I could relate, but . . . “Can you just take us to the Daily Planet Building?”

“Course.” He shook his head and levered the car out of park. “But you’re losing your edge.”

“My edge is razor-sharp,” I volleyed back.

No one in the backseat weighed in. Traitors.

I still wasn’t sure how to handle the contents of the folder. My friends should know what had been inside. I also knew they’d be concerned for my safety if I told them. Well, more concerned than usual.

That always proved inconvenient. I didn’t want to risk outright lying though, not when they’d been targeted too.

“Uh-oh,” Devin said. “Lois is being a little too quiet. Think she’s figuring out how to manage us into letting her take point?”

“Definitely,” Maddy said.

James couldn’t resist chiming in too. “It’s her way.”

“I’m not *that* predictable,” I said.

Taxi Jack made a disbelieving grunt, which I chose to ignore.

The thing was, even though they’d attacked all of us, my byline had been the only one underlined in the folder. My

stories were the only ones included, even if the others had done additional reporting to help. Sure, there’d been four of them like there were four of us and they’d come after the others too. But that boy had come after me *first*. Not to mention the story about my *dad*. And not to mention the picture of me on the street.

It had to mean something.

On the other hand, Donovan was plenty smart enough to figure out that the best way to manipulate me was to put people I cared about in danger. That didn’t mean I would risk them getting hurt for some vendetta against me. Where were these teenagers even from, that they’d spoken about being rescued? How had they gotten hooked up with Donovan?

Taxi Jack wove effortlessly through traffic.

“There are so many Loose Lips threads about spring formal season,” James said. “I’m wondering if we should do a story.”

I snorted, and scooted to face the backseat. “James, maybe you should volunteer to take someone shopping. An exposé on the horrors of dress hunting.”

“You know,” Maddy said, “it’s not a half-bad idea.” James shot her a skeptical eyebrow raise, and she said, “Well, for *someone* to do it. How to find something affordable and flattering, you know.”

That sounded like Maddy was giving the dance real thought. It never occurred to me to do social stuff like that, not unless we *were* covering it. It’s not as if I could take a date with SmallvilleGuy so far away.

“Wait, are any of you going to the spring formal?” I asked.

Devin said, “I already asked Katrina Long. We’re keeping it casual.”

“And you, you’re going with Dante?” I asked Maddy.

She shrugged. “I guess so. We haven’t talked about it.”

Huh. I visualized one of the posters in the hallway at school. We were talking about something less than two weeks away . . . was it weird they hadn’t made plans yet?

“What about you, James?” Maddy asked.

James shook his head, and if I wasn’t wrong, there was an embarrassed pink tint to his cheeks. “I don’t know if I’ll go,” he said. “There’s, um, no one I really want to ask.”

We pulled up at the curb in front of the Daily Planet Building, and so the time for dance talk was over. James practically leaped out of the car, Maddy piling out after him. I started to take out my wallet, but Devin said, “I got this one,” and paid Jack.

As he accepted the cash, Taxi Jack shot me a kind look and said, “Take care you don’t cut yourself with that sharp edge. A dance would do you good.”

Then he screeched away into traffic. “Let’s go,” I said, giving a sarcastic twirl as we crossed the concrete plaza to the revolving doors of the Daily Planet Building.

The thrill of working in this building, with its iconic globe on top, would never fade. Some of the older, professional *Planet* reporters—even besides our editor Perry White—recognized us now, and we got friendly nods as we made our way through the gleaming lobby, all the way over to the grim, gray elevators down to our basement office.

So what if we were headquartered in the Morgue alongside the paper copies of the moldering archive? That didn’t bother me anymore. Being part of the *Daily Scoop* meant we were also part of the *Daily Planet*.

We navigated the dim hallway, past the familiar row of framed front pages screaming about disasters and big news events. One more recently hung was the story with which we’d taken down mobster Moxie “Boss” Mannheim and cleared James’s dad’s name.

Tension built inside me. I didn’t like feeling behind the curve. This story was mine. I *was* going to get Donovan.

But I still couldn’t figure it out. The group had come after us, provoked us. They’d said they’d be seeing us again soon.

They were stronger than us. Faster. One could fly. I still didn’t know what powers the fourth girl had—the one who’d apparently come after Devin.

James opened the office door and flipped on the lights, illuminating the room that held our four giant, ancient desks and rows of file drawers against the walls. Meanwhile, I logged into the chat app. There was a message from a few minutes earlier, a response to my Typhon query.

**SmallvilleGuy:** *Nothing. Let me see if I can track it down. Everything okay?*

**SkepticGirl1:** *Peachy-ish. Fill you in later.*

Researching the term was one less thing I had to worry about for now. I could always count on SmallvilleGuy to have my back.

Devin walked over and snagged his chair, rolling it into the

middle area of the office between our desks. James and Maddy followed suit with their own.

I stood, crossing my arms. They'd accused me of plotting to manage them, but I was getting the distinct impression they had made a plan about how to handle me.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Devin strode over and grabbed my chair, then wheeled it over to the others. "You said we'd regroup, so we're regrouping. Whatever scheming is going to happen, we'll do together."

"We're all involved in this," Maddy said. "You think it's got something to do with Donovan."

I eased into the chair. "Fine. Tell me what happened to you guys this morning before I got there."

Maddy, James, and Devin exchanged a glance.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Shouldn't we ask you to tell us what you saw on the way home Friday first?" Maddy said. "I mean, chronologically. We're assuming it's related."

"Touché," I said, "it is and I will, along with what happened to me this morning. But I want to hear your impressions without them being biased by mine."

"Okay, I guess," James said. Devin and Maddy nodded.

They'd freak about the articles and that photo of me.

I was convinced it was Donovan. He loved paper records, and he hated me. But why would he be trying to lure me or any of us into coming after him? I couldn't puzzle it out. Maybe knowing what the other members of the silver squad had done would help.

"You can go first," Maddy said to James.

"I was going to school like always," James said. "Dad was heading into the campaign office, so I rode partway in his car. They let me out a couple of blocks away, and I was early, so I wasn't in any rush."

"I wonder what it's like to be early," I mused.

"You'll never know," Maddy said.

"When I got close to school, I saw a scuffle out front," James went on. "Then I realized it was Maddy and that winged guy." He paused. "I know we've seen some crazy things, but I can't believe I just said that *I* saw a winged guy."

"At least we all saw it too?" I said. James didn't know about my experience with the flying man years ago, so he had no idea I'd had a similar experience with far fewer witnesses.

Perry always says a good journalist trusts their gut, then finds the proof to back it up.

"We all saw it, and we saw some crazy stuff from the others," Devin said. He mimed zipping his lips and throwing away a key. "I know, I know, I'm waiting my turn."

James went on. "So, I saw a winged guy standing over Maddy, and she was kicking at him."

"Good job." I held up my hand for a high-five and she slapped it. She'd taught me a trick the other week for always connecting with the other person's hand: looking at their elbow. It was a high-five game changer.

"She could have been hurt," James said.

"She wasn't," I said.

Maddy leaned forward with her elbows on her knees. “It seemed to freak him out, honestly, that I was fighting back.”

“Hmm,” I said, “the others didn’t seem freaked out. Not too freaked out, anyway.”

James interrupted. “Then I called out to Maddy, but before I could go over there, that girl picked me up with those silver hands of hers and carried me there.” He rolled up his sleeve to show an angry, darkening bruise on his forearm.

Maddy gasped. “James!”

He soaked in Maddy’s concern. “It hurt. She wasn’t gentle about it.”

“You’ll live,” I told James. Was Maddy’s concern for James friendly or something more? That wasn’t my real question. My real question was whether something was up with her and Dante. (Was she still happy with him? Or was something going on between them? That was a conversation for me to have with her later. In private.) “What did her hands feel like?”

“Cold. Not stiff, though,” James said. “Whatever was on them was flexible. She moved them like regular hands. Just very, very strong regular hands.”

“Do you think it was metal?” I asked.

He considered. “Not any kind I’ve ever felt before. But . . . maybe.”

“And she deliberately carried you over to Devin and Maddy?” I asked.

“Yeah, she did,” Devin answered. “I saw her grab him, before I got distracted by the girl who came after me. I was walking up from the other direction when mask girl started

shooting these eye-beams at me. I know how it sounds. I pretended it was some kind of laser game, because there were still a few people around—and I had to dodge to stay clear of them.”

So that was her special thing. Laser eyes. Great. “But you could?” I pressed. “Dodge?”

“Only because she wasn’t trying too hard. Or maybe isn’t that good at using her eye lasers? I did feel them once, though. It was like a wave of heat pushing me where she wanted me to go.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “She wanted to push you to where James and Maddy were. The fast guy was watching me after the movie the other night. And he knocked into me twice—first on Friday, then again this morning. He led me to school.”

“You were going there anyway, though,” Maddy said.

“Obviously they wanted to mess with all of us.” I thought of that photograph of me. They’d wanted to mess with me *more*. That guy had known where to pick me up all three times.

“What is it?” Devin asked.

They were getting far too perceptive, my friends.

“The guy had articles in his backpack,” I said. “In the folder I got.”

I wasn’t going to conceal *everything*. I opened up my messenger bag and passed over the folder. They flipped through what I’d left inside it.

I’d taken out the picture of me. And I’d taken out our article about Steve Jenkins and Advanced Research Labs, Inc. But I’d left the military stuff. Except for the profile of Dad.

“These are articles about military research,” James said. “Why would he be carrying them?”

“Who do we know who keeps paper records?” I asked. “That logo, it had the elements of the Ismenios logo in it. That was our dragon and warrior.”

“True,” Maddy said thoughtfully. “But they looked different. I’m not sure it’s him.”

This I hadn’t expected at all. “Why not? Because of the art style?”

“Why would he come back? At us? It doesn’t make sense,” she said. “And they seemed to like whoever did this to them. I can’t imagine anyone liking Donovan.”

“You’ve got a point there.” I shuddered just thinking of him and his creepy research techniques. “But who else could it be?”

“I’m not convinced either way,” Devin said. “They didn’t seem to recognize his name. And as far as I’m concerned, figuring out who’s behind this is step two—especially if it’s Donovan. We need to find out where the new test subjects came from. They looked like they were our age, and there was something sad about them . . .”

Rudely mocking, but yes, sad too. I knew exactly what he meant. Trust Devin to pick up on the same thing as me. “You’re right. They were too skinny. Their clothes weren’t in great shape. Maybe we should start by checking missing kid reports,” I said. “Someone has to be looking for at least one of them.”

Devin wheeled away to mouse his computer to life. “I can do that.”

I tugged on my lip, thinking about how else we might be able to track them down. A series of actions unfolded. “Maddy, do you think Dante could whip up some flyers with their faces from your description? We could split up and take those around a few neighborhoods after school tomorrow.”

And hope not to encounter anyone we couldn’t handle.

Maddy hesitated, but said, “I’ll text him.”

So my sixth sense was right. Something *was* up with her and paradise boy.

“I volunteer to write some posts on Loose Lips, for schools around town,” I said, starting to roll back to my desk.

I’d also be thinking about how to connect this to Donovan. How to nail him. Finally.

James moved back toward his own desk in his high-backed chair. “What should I do?”

I didn’t get a chance to answer, though, because our boss chose that moment to storm in. Perry entered like a thundercloud, slamming the door behind him so hard the glass rattled. He sported one of his usual trendy knock-off suits, and his tie was loose around his neck.

I now recognized that as a warning. A loose tie meant he was in a mood.

“Was that just for the effect?” I asked. “Or were you hoping to shatter the door?”

“Do I do anything just for the effect?” he returned in one of his “end of my rope” tones.

“I’m going to refrain from giving an answer you won’t like,” I said.

“Smart move.” He paced, noticing our chairs were still semi-gathered. “Am I breaking up a staff meeting?” Without waiting for a response, he said, “Perfect timing. Huddle back in.”

Devin stopped typing and wheeled back over to us. Perry kept pacing. “I’m down here because I have an assignment. Actually, this is great. I can have the newsroom send those calls down to your phones. This will be good training. You can learn how to weed out the best information when there’s a flood of cockamamie reports coming in.” He shook his head. “Yes, that’s it. This will be excellent training.”

The others looked to me. I was the closest thing we had to a Perry whisperer. Which wasn’t very close at all.

I had a sneaking suspicion that we were about to be cursed, not rewarded.

“Um, Mr. White?” I interrupted his pacing.

He pivoted and trained a dead stare on me.

“I mean, Perry.”

“Yes?” he asked.

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh,” he said, flapping a hand around. “Right. We’ve been getting inundated with calls about ‘strange sightings’ around the city. All afternoon. Fast people in silver shoes or some nonsense like that. Loonies claiming to see silver-winged boys or girls lifting cars and then taking off. It’s madness, of course. There’s no truth to any of it, obviously. The photos people are sending in must be some kind of optical illusion or pranks. Costumes, maybe. The police have a statement saying they’re

investigating it as a public disturbance—no harm’s been done yet. *But* someone has to run it down and explain it anyway. And that someone is all of you.”

“You’re sure there’s nothing to it?” I asked, bracing for an explosive response.

“People get hurt when they believe in things that are phony. There’s a danger to it. So run it down,” Perry said neutrally. “But I don’t want the *Planet* turning into the *Weekly Weird News* or that irresponsible parasite Loose Lips. Bring me the real truth, not a bunch of crazy rumors about bat boys or flying people.”

“Will do,” I said without looking at the others.

Not that I thought for a second he wanted the real truth on this one.

## CHAPTER 5

**After Perry left**, the four of us exchanged wary looks. Devin and Maddy got to work without further comment. James looked to me. “What should I do?”

“You want to be in charge of the deluge of calls when they start coming?” I asked. “You could try to get a location for each sighting.”

Devin gave every appearance of having become oblivious to the world around him, typing fast. But he turned his head and said, “Good thinking—then I can plot them on a city map.”

“On the plus side, at least you don’t have to worry about dress shopping for the time being,” I said.

“Point,” James said.

I made my way over to my desk. We obviously couldn’t do the assignment Perry had given us—not exactly—but we couldn’t exactly *not* do it either.

I pulled out my laptop, logged on to the *Planet*’s wi-fi network, and started searching for a list of other high schools in the greater Metropolis area. Each one would have a dedicated open thread on Loose Lips. Neither Perry nor our parent company were fans of the Metropolis-based site and its approach to “news gathering,” i.e., a free-for-all of unsourced allegations with the most salacious highlighted on its homepage. But people *used* it. Lots of people. Gossipy people. And that’s what I needed.

I searched the school threads out so I could write my posts.

Five minutes later on the dot—apparently just enough time for Perry to get upstairs and give his command to the reception desks in news—our phones started to ring. They were old-school desk lines and quickly became as loud as an orchestra in the middle of a *very* annoying symphony.

I heard James answer, “*Daily Planet* . . .” He raised his voice to be heard over the noise. “Slow down, ma’am. Now . . . what can we do for you?”

Maddy called over to him. “Let me finish sending this message to Dante, and I can help out.”

“This one look familiar to you guys?” Devin asked.

He had paused on one mug shot with two snapshots scanned beside it in the missing teens database. We all gathered and squinted, the obnoxious *bringggg*-ing echoing around

us. The boy in the shots had a slight resemblance to the speedy guy, but it wasn't him.

"I don't think so," I said.

"Yeah, me neither on closer look," he said, and clicked to advance to the next entry.

When I got back to my desk, I picked up my screaming phone handset, said "Call back" into it, then left the receiver off the hook. Devin picked his up and did the same, sans the command I'd given. The symphony quieted to a semi-manageable chorus of rings, in between which Maddy and James talked to the callers.

I made my first post on a thread for a high school halfway across town, on the edge of Suicide Slum. My Loose Lips account wasn't the same name I used on Strange Skies; it was one I used elsewhere online.

**Posted by GirlFriday1 at 4:15 p.m.:** The grapevine is buzzing with reports of teenagers committing incredible acts all over town while wearing silver costumes or accessories. Do you know anything about this? Have any teenagers at your school suddenly developed gifts you can't explain? Have any gone missing? PM me with a solid tip and I'll be in touch.

I added the message to each school thread on the boards, then hesitated. This intersected with Strange Skies in a way that made it a no-brainer to post there too. Just in case. I'd have to be more specific about the location, so I massaged it a bit to make it sound like I was just interested from afar. I hadn't posted on the site in ages.

**Posted by SkepticGirl1 at 4:22 p.m.:** The Metropolis grapevine is buzzing with reports of weird teenagers with silver armor of some kind committing incredible acts all over the city. Anyone heard about this? Anything to share?

It was vague enough that I thought it safe to risk hitting the post button.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

**SmallvilleGuy:** *I have some info for you. You want it now?*

I hesitated. James and Maddy were both talking to people on the phone and scribbling notes.

**SkepticGirl1:** *I'll probably head home in a half an hour. Meet you in the game in 45 mins?*

**SmallvilleGuy:** *Sure. Question first—did you see that speedy guy again?*

I frowned. My whole idea to leave early was in hope that he might try to tackle me again. I *would* figure out what was going on here.

**SkepticGirl1:** *Yeah, and there are more of them. I'll tell you all about it. Why?*

**SmallvilleGuy:** *I had a feeling—the Loose Lips home page has a few eyewitness reports that sounded familiar. Maybe you should take a cab home?*

**SkepticGirl1:** *I'm not afraid of them.*

**SmallvilleGuy:** *So you've figured out what their deal is? There's no threat?*

"Lois?" Maddy asked, holding a phone receiver to her shoulder. "Did you just growl?"

"Of course not," I said. It must have just slipped out. I messaged SmallvilleGuy back.

**SkepticGirl1:** *I'll summon Taxi Jack. Again.*

**SmallvilleGuy:** *Thank you. <3*

I'd also risk running out of allowance money early this month, but oh well. Trying to outsmart Donovan and track him down qualified as a special occasion.

\* \* \*

I arrived home at the same time as Mom, and I could tell from her slacks and tucked-in shirt that she'd come from campus. She tried the door first and found it locked, then fished out her key.

"Did you have class tonight?" I asked. "I thought it was only Tuesday and Friday nights."

"And office hours today and Wednesdays. I share a closet-sized space with three other professors," Mom said. She paused before she opened the door. "One of them is a total bore—talking to him reminds me of your face whenever Principal Butler comes up."

"Condolences," I said.

She laughed and let us inside.

"But you're liking it?" I asked, curious. She'd been so excited and nervous, and secretly I'd been afraid the actual experience of being at the front of the classroom would disappoint. Or that the students would prove to be obnoxious cretins.

"I love it. It's nice to feel useful. To somebody besides you guys, I mean. Not that that's not nice too," she said. "I don't have any regrets about waiting to do this."

I touched her arm. "Mom, I know exactly what you mean. I'm not offended. It's awesome. Would it be weird if I came to watch you teach sometime?"

"Yes," she said. Then, "But you could sit in the back."

"Deal." I started for the stairs.

"Dinner in half an hour," she said, tossing down her bag and heading for the kitchen. "Tell your sister."

"Aye, aye."

When I got to the landing, Lucy's door was open, a rarity. She wasn't wearing her holoset and hanging out with her unicorn friends, either. Instead she had a tablet on her lap. She must've borrowed it from Mom.

I tapped on the doorframe. "Dinner'll be ready in a little while."

"Okay," she said. She hesitated a moment, then waved me in.

I wasn't going to have much time left to talk to SmallvilleGuy at this rate, but Lucy was my sister. And sister time was important. I stepped in and shut the door behind me.

"What's up?" I asked.

She held up her tablet, and I could tell whatever she was showing me was some kind of mock-up of cockpit controls.

"You know how you said I'd find what I'm meant to do?" she asked.

I nodded. "You have plenty of time."

"Well, I don't need it. I think I'm supposed to be a pilot." She was practically wiggling. "The planes the other night were so cool. This game simulates some of the flying."

I sat down beside her, squinting at the console graphic. It was nice to see *her* excited too, but I worried. "Was this Dad's idea?"

She laid the tablet face down. “No. It was mine.”

“Are you sure?”

That earned an outright scowl. “The airplanes were amazing. I talked to a guy about what flying is like and . . . it sounds like the best thing in the world. I want to learn how to do that.”

“Then why stop with Earth? I think you should consider being an astronaut.”

She stared at me for a moment, and then a smile bloomed on her face. “Oh my god. *Space*,” she said. “The training’s the same, I bet, at least at first. I’d still get to learn to fly planes.”

She picked up the tablet and started scrolling around on it again, pulling up a search page. I stood and she didn’t even notice.

“You’re welcome,” I said. “Best big sister ever.”

“Sorry, thanks, Lois,” Lucy said. She still didn’t look up.

I grinned as I left her room. It was weird but in the most wonderful way to be part of a household of ladies who were following their dreams. Or at least figuring their dreams out.

My new dream was catching whoever had taken that picture of me, whoever had sent those armored mean girls and guys after my friends.

*And me.*

*Donovan, you’re going down, and so is whoever you’re working with.*

I locked the door to my room behind me and retrieved the holoset from my desk. The bedroom fell away as I sat down and switched it on, the game landscape surging to life in its

place. I’d entered *Worlds War Three* right beside our turret, under a bright pink and purple sky.

SmallvilleGuy took my arm as soon as my avatar entered the scene. “I saw your post on *Strange Skies*,” he said as I looked up into his concerned face. “You weren’t worried? I thought you didn’t trust TheInventor.”

He wasn’t wrong about that. I couldn’t quite meet his eyes, not while I was spying on someone he considered a friend. “I kept it as non-specific as I could.”

“You mentioned *Metropolis*,” he said.

“Your handle has your hometown in it,” I said. “So there. Lots of people live in both these places. It’ll be fine.”

Although there weren’t *that* many people in Smallville, there were enough I couldn’t track him down with the information I had. Not without serious effort, anyway, and I would never have intruded that way without permission. And, I realized, I didn’t need to anymore. He was going to tell me. In person, before I knew it.

By silent agreement, we entered our turret, where we had more privacy. “I guess that’s fair enough,” he said. “I still don’t feel like we have anything to fear from TheInventor. But I trust your judgment.”

Were those the most romantic words ever uttered? No, but they were good ones to hear.

“That makes one of us,” I said, only half meaning it. For the most part, I did trust my own judgment. But I was more than capable of screwing up. Just, sometimes, I forgot about that in my quest to move forward.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. The shadows inside the turret fell over us, hiding his expression.

“I kept something back from my friends. I’m not sure I should’ve.”

I filled him in on our encounters with the shiny, powered teens, how they’d herded us to school. Unlike with my fellow *Scoopers*, I told him everything that had been in the folder. He froze when I mentioned the, um, surveillance photo of me on the street.

“I don’t like this at all,” he said. “You *should* tell the others. You’re obviously in danger, if whoever’s doing this is fixated on you like this.”

“But so are they,” I said. “These guys didn’t just target me. And if I tell Maddy, James, and Devin, they’ll worry about me and it’ll distract them. We need to chase our leads. Don’t you agree that it’s best if we can wrap this up quickly?”

“I don’t agree that you should risk your safety,” he said. “But I also know that you are smart and can handle whatever comes at you.”

Maybe *those* were the most romantic words that had ever been uttered.

“I hope so,” I said, offering him my hands. He took them in his and we practically floated to our little ledge with the bench. We both sat down.

“I just have this gut feeling it has to be Donovan,” I said. “He’s involved. Who else could do this kind of advanced science without making it easier to run down? Who would come after *me*? But Maddy disagrees. She says it’s not him,

because these silvered types seem to *like* whoever did this to them. Or at least not be creeped out by the person. That’s not Donovan’s M.O.”

“He sounds awful, so it’s hard to argue with that.” SmallvilleGuy shrugged. “I don’t see any way to be certain at this point. Do you want to hear where Typhon comes from?”

“You say the sweetest things. Enlighten me.” I was glad for the subject change.

“More mythology,” he said.

“I mentioned the logo, didn’t I? It’s the same as Ismenios’s almost. More mythology could point to Donovan.”

“Or could point elsewhere, but it’s worth noting,” he said. “Typhon and Echidna were an infamous couple in Greek mythology—they were parents to a number of monsters. The Hydra was one of their offspring,” he said, ticking it off on his finger, “along with Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards Hades, a dragon, the Chimera—”

“I get it. A lot of monsters. Who knew I’d have to become a mythology expert to go after bad guys?”

“A lot, yes. And the fiercest ones. Typhon was a giant monster thing himself and nearly impossible to defeat in battle. He eventually got taken down by Zeus, working with the warrior Cadmus and another god.”

“I’ll remind you here that Donovan’s company name is Ismenios, the enemy of Cadmus.”

“I’ll give you that does seem like a clue,” he said. “Echidna was half beautiful woman, half snake-serpent, and she outlived Typhon. She was eventually killed too.”

“Funny,” I said, rolling my eyes. “That they’d use Typhon as a name for something, like Echidna wasn’t the mother of the monsters. Like she didn’t outlive him. That has Donovan written all over it.”

SmallvilleGuy didn’t say anything. I studied his light green profile.

“What?” I prodded. “Your silence is speaking volumes.”

He hesitated. Then he asked, “You should gather the facts before you make up your mind, shouldn’t you?”

I nearly growled again, but only because he was right. “You and Perry,” I said, “will be the death of my sanity.”

“I hope not,” he said, smiling at me and reaching out to take my hand.

“Anyway, thanks for the mythological intel. We’re trying to find out who the people who approached us are first,” I said. “We figure someone has to miss them. But what I’m really looking forward to is hunting down the monster who’s playing with us.”

*With me*, I thought, but didn’t say.

“Playing with the whole city, sounds like,” SmallvilleGuy said. “I don’t like that these guys are being seen out and about. Even if they’re not doing anything harmful except being seen.”

“Neither does Perry. He assigned us to find out the truth of these sightings. If he even believes they’re happening.”

But something in SmallvilleGuy’s words stuck with me like an echo—the whole city part. “You know who I bet is still in the loop on anything happening to the whole city. Boss Moxie.”

He snorted. “Too bad you put him in prison.”

“Maybe not,” I said.

“Lois, what are you thinking?” he asked.

“I’m thinking about checking in on visitor protocols at Stryker Island. What better source of intel than a crime kingpin who has nothing to do but gossip?” I asked.

“You said you’d be careful.”

“No, I didn’t.” I grinned at him. “I said that I’d do my best.”

## CHAPTER 6

I logged on to **Strange Skies** when I got up the next morning, and skimmed the replies to my thread. They were all links to sketchy reports posted elsewhere online. Nothing firsthand. Based on what was being posted, it seemed that no one had *directly* experienced the powers the silvery armor gave these guys except for us.

Then I saw I had a PM. It was a message from our “friend” TheInventor, sent at 11:30 the night before. I hesitated, almost afraid to open it.

When the government task force had been using **Strange Skies** to post phony sightings, trying to flush out the real flying man, I had overheard something my dad said that made me believe he had a source at the site itself. And my guess was TheInventor, despite the fact that he’d helped us get rid of

the government spies the first time, and despite the fact that SmallvilleGuy trusted him.

It was a gut feeling. Here was hoping Devin turned up some truth to support it.

I clicked the link to open the message.

*Thought you might be interested in this*, it said, with a link to a post on Loose Lips. I clicked through, unsettled.

**Posted by Maya50 at 4:45pm:** I don’t even know what I saw, but I did manage to take a video with my phone. Looks real to me, but I don’t know — I watched this guy running around two little kids in the park. They thought he was a delight. I did not. Too weird.

The video showed speedy guy running so fast he was a blur, to the sounds of two delighted kids in Centennial Park. It was short, and he took off by the end of it.

Not earthshattering, the kind of thing I’d seen with my own eyes. Definitely not enough to convince Perry.

But the most troubling part was the context of the post. TheInventor had sent me to a reply to one of the threads I had posted on Loose Lips—not **Strange Skies**—which wasn’t comforting in the least. I should never have used such similar wording on both sites. This meant that he’d connected GirlFriday1 to me, and it meant that he was keeping an eye on me, too—at least online. He’d probably figured out that I lived in Metropolis. My posts on Loose Lips hadn’t taken pains to hide that.

This wasn’t good.

\* \* \*

My commute was on the jumpy side. I kept checking

behind me on the subway, looking both ways twice at every cross street. I reasoned that now that I was on high alert, I'd be better prepared if I had to defend myself.

I just hoped I was right about that.

But so far, so good. I'd left a little early, so I could stop to pick up a cheap phone I thought might come in handy. Since I lost access to Dad's cabinet, I'd been studying up on other uses for readily available technology. I'd also taken an interest in the research of people who called themselves "locksport enthusiasts," detailing how to best various locks and safes for fun; most of them weren't even criminals, a lot were cops, and they treated it as a game. Then I followed my phone's directions up the street toward the spot where Maddy suggested we meet.

Someone had apparently reserved *our* study room. The nerve. The librarian had texted to let her know just in case we were planning to use it.

Here was hoping one of my friends had come up with some good information overnight. I hadn't. The few PMs I'd gotten on Loose Lips had been of the gross or useless variety, people poking fun or looking for dates. No thanks. Except for the one public reply that TheInventor had also seen. I'd just sent him back a short, no-nonsense PM: *Thanks*.

Of course, I meant the opposite. I didn't like it that he'd connected my identity across the two platforms. I didn't like feeling like my every move was being scrutinized. Like someone might be watching me.

I especially didn't like the idea it was Dabney Donovan. Or, for that matter, the mysterious TheInventor. Based on the

online chatter, it seemed that armored group had made their presence known for a couple of hours the day before, and not been spotted since. I had a feeling they wouldn't lie low for long. The police were reportedly continuing to look into the sightings as a public nuisance, but nothing more serious.

The aroma of sugar and icing when I opened the glass door at Maddy's designated address was all it took to convince me that Dough-Re-Me Donuts was an *excellent* substitute for the library. A case filled with colorful and regular glazed donuts dominated the space, and the employees had brightly dyed hair that seemed to match.

"Over here!" Maddy called out. She, Devin, and James were sitting at one of the small square tables. They had an open box of donuts and a cardboard thermos of coffee with a spare cup beside it.

"I love you," I said, reaching out for a red-frosted donut before I even bothered to sit.

Maddy grabbed my arm to stop me and asked, "Password?"

"Here?" I said.

She nodded, while James and Devin grinned, amused. Her T-shirt today sported the fake band name Get InFormation.

"Fine. Julia Child," I said.

"Now you may have a donut," she said.

I took one and the empty chair. And yes, I'd been surprised to learn the famous chef who loved French food had been a spy. Lesson: Never underestimate a woman. Or a chef.

Maddy sat back down and slid over a thick stack of photocopies.

“The librarian let me make these gratis this morning, to make up for giving up our room,” she said. “No ten cents per page.”

I leaned over to look at the renderings.

Dante had captured all four of the skinny silver armor gang remarkably well for never having seen them. The two girls and the two guys should all be recognizable from these sketches—at least, if we could find someone who knew them. The caption Maddy had added read: *Do you recognize these faces?* And gave our *Scoop* main phone number with James’s extension.

“Your boyfriend is so talented,” I said.

“Yep,” she murmured, and sipped from her coffee cup.

I narrowed my eyes at her, and she was definitely avoiding meeting mine. I took a bite of my donut and then slid the handouts back.

“This means we can divide and conquer right after school,” I said.

James open his mouth and I knew without a doubt he was going to volunteer to be Maddy’s partner. But I wanted to talk to her about whether something was up with her and Dante. So I said, “Maddy and I will take the schools on the west side. You two cover the south, then we’ll reconvene at the office. Okay?”

James looked disappointed, but he nodded. Maddy, if I wasn’t wrong, seemed downright relieved.

“Anything useful?” I asked. “In the calls?”

James reached out for a glazed donut. “There must be something about my voice that encourages people to go on . . . and on . . .”

I said, “It’s those politician genes you’ve got.”

“Yes, that must be it,” James said. “Or the fact I didn’t hang up on people.”

I shrugged innocently. “Anything else?”

Devin put his elbows on the table. “I plotted in coordinates, but they were pretty evenly scattered. I can show you the map at the *Scoop* later.”

“I got nothing from my message board posts either,” I said. “But I had a couple more ideas last night after I got home.” I rummaged in my bag and pulled out the small prepaid phone I picked up on my way to school. I held it out to Devin, and he accepted it.

“You got me a phone?” he said, squinting. “You shouldn’t have?”

“It’s not for you. Not exactly.” I crossed my fingers he could make my idea work. “Can you figure out a way that, if they show up again, we can plant it on one of them, and we can track them using it? I read an article about GPS signals.”

He turned the phone over in his hands, and checked something in the sim port. “With a little fiddling around, should be able to,” he said. “I’ll work on it at lunch.”

“Excellent,” I said.

Maddy never missed a thing. “You said you had ideas. Plural. What else?”

“Oh,” I said.

I *had* said I had ideas. Maybe I shouldn’t have. On the other hand . . .

“Well, I was just thinking about who might have heard if someone was up to no good . . . You know, a source who

would be really plugged in, one of our last connections to Donovan . . .” They’d never guess, and I figured they’d be skeptical too. I selected another donut, regular glazed, and considered it before taking a bite.

“Who?” Maddy’s brow furrowed.

So did James’s. “My dad won’t know anything about this,” he said.

“No, not him.” I decided to play it as no big deal. “Boss Moxie.”

There was absolute silence for a second, and then Devin burst out laughing.

I gave him the look I reserved for catcallers. My dad jokingly referred to it as my death ray glare.

“Sorry,” Devin said, but he was still laughing. “You’re serious.”

“It’s Lois,” James said with a genuinely affectionate smile. “Of course she’s serious. Why and how would he talk to you?” he asked me.

“You laugh, but I did a little research. It’s a long shot—”

“I’d think so,” Maddy said, and then she *and* Devin were both giggling loudly. The people at the nearest table gave us dirty looks.

“It’s not funny,” I said. “If anyone knows something who isn’t directly involved, there’s a fair bet it’s Moxie. You know he still has spies all over the city. He considers it his.” Though it wasn’t. It was *ours*. The city belonged to everyone who lived here.

“So,” James said, and at least he had a straight face,

“how are you planning to go about this? Oh, I know—hire a skywriter?”

“No, I’m going to call Stryker’s Island and ask to be added to his visitor’s list.” I took a satisfying bite of my glazed donut.

“Oh, that’s all,” James said.

“No sweat,” Maddy added.

“Come on, you know you want to mock me some more too,” I said to Devin.

“I’m sure he’ll be falling all over himself to see you,” Devin said.

“Very mature. I’m beginning to feel a little ganged up on.” But I couldn’t help smiling. “Look, I know it’s a long shot, but hey, you never make the ones you don’t take.”

“Truer words,” Maddy said.

She picked up a donut of her own and we tapped them together in a sugary version of cheers.

\*\*\*

After school, armed with our bags full of flyers, Maddy and I climbed up the steps of the subway stop closest to the first neighborhood we were canvassing, on the edge of Centennial Park. I was attempting to conserve what cash I had left for the inevitable emergency cab rides we’d need.

I’d chosen this section of the city in part because of the video TheInventor had forwarded. There was a possibility—slim, but it existed—that he was just trying to be helpful.

“What are we going to tell Perry if he sees these?” Maddy asked as we exited onto the sidewalk. The high wall that

fenced in this side of the park was visible up ahead. “Do we mention we ran into the people everyone is reporting seeing?”

“I don’t think so. We can say we based the sketches on eye-witness accounts and we haven’t confirmed anything yet,” I said. “Until we have.”

“But . . . then we’d tell him the truth?” she asked.

“If we had proof—this is a little more believable, isn’t it? It’s not mind control. It’s not a clone. It’s something he will be able to see. There’s a reason they say seeing is believing.”

“I think Perry might have to be lifted into the air by the winged guy to believe,” she said.

“Or pummeled by the strong girl. You may be right.” I had the same worry; Perry was so sensible, so fact-based, and the kind of facts we’d tended to find lately didn’t square with the status quo of reality. I paused to take some flyers out of my bag and Maddy did the same. “First school should be up here on the left.”

“I brought tape,” Maddy said.

“Good thinking.” We waited for a walk sign, and I figured it was as good a time as any to bring up the weirdness I’d picked up on around her beau. “So, Dante’s pretty cool to help us out with this.”

“Yep,” Maddy said.

Clearly I was going to have to break out the investigative journalism techniques, aka be direct.

“Are you fighting with him?” I asked. “Are you breaking up? Talk to me. What’s going on? I thought you two had the perfect relationship. He worships you, you really, really like him.”

There was a lengthy silence in return. An awkwardly lengthy one.

*Oh no.* Maybe I’d gotten too cocky. I was still relatively new to this friend business. Had I screwed up even asking? Should I have waited for her to offer up details?

“Wait,” I stopped walking and turned to her. “Should I not be asking this? I waited until we were alone. I just wanted to know what’s up. Things have seemed . . . weird. The not knowing if you were going to the dance yet. The different rows at the movie. The general vibe has been weird.” I raked a hand through my hair, then waved my free hand around. “I can’t get your back and tell you he sucks unless I know that’s what I’m supposed to do.”

Maddy shook her stack of handouts back and forth. “He doesn’t suck. And it’s fine to ask. It’s just . . . I’m not sure how to answer. I don’t know what to say. That’s why I didn’t bring it up. I’ve never had a, you know, boyfriend before. Maybe it’s normal for feelings to change. After a while. It’s been six months. That’s a long time.”

That didn’t sound good. “So you feel different now?”

Maddy looked at me, and now there was relief in her eyes. She kept her voice down, but she started talking. “It’s like . . . I used to get nervous around him, and then I didn’t, and it was cool. We were just comfortable together. It would have gotten exhausting, right? If I’d always been nervous around him. But now I don’t feel comfortable anymore.” A group of girls approached us as they left the school, and she flashed a flyer at them. “Any of these faces look familiar?”

They squinted and shook their heads no. “Thanks,” she said, and we moved on up the sidewalk.

“So you’re not comfortable with him anymore?” I asked, not willing to drop it.

“No, I am. But then I’m not,” she said. “I’m not explaining this very well. It’s like, when we first got together, there was this sort of invisible wall between us. I always wanted to reach through it, climb over it, get around it.”

I nodded. I knew that feeling well. “But?”

“These days it feels like it’s still there and I *want* it to be. I’m happier that it’s there. He hasn’t changed, but I may have. I used to feel like we knew each other, but now I feel like he doesn’t really know me at all. And maybe I don’t know him either. What do you think?”

I thought I was utterly useless in this situation. “I’ve gone on like, one date, and my boyfriend lives in a video game. We’re going to meet each other at some point, but . . .” The details of that could wait. This was about her. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what to tell me either.” She threw her shoulders back. Her eyeliner made little wings at the corners of her eyes, and the right side was smudged. “It’ll work out or it won’t, right? This’ll pass or it won’t. We have a story to get.”

I considered bringing up James, asking if she still thought about him in a way that might play a role in this new distance between her and Dante. If she wanted him to play one. I’d never mentioned to her that James’s feelings for her had changed. Should I have? But James’s confession was six months

ago. I had no idea if he felt the same now. Best to stay out of it.

So I decided to go with her subject change instead. We had a job to do. “There is news to be gathered,” I agreed. “You’re singing my song.”

We circulated outside the school’s basketball and tennis courts—no luck getting a hit—and posted a few flyers on the walls outside, then headed several blocks south. My feet were screaming by the time we finished with our third school. No one had recognized anyone yet.

“Maybe we should be showing pictures of Donovan,” I grumbled. I pulled out my phone and checked it. There was one message from SmallvilleGuy that said: *Any luck?*

**SkepticGirl1:** *Nada so far. We’re canvassing.*

**SmallvilleGuy:** *I’ll save you the time you’d spend on this part: no posts about any new sightings this afternoon. I’ve been watching Loose Lips.*

I considered what Maddy had said, about the wall between her and Dante. If there was ever one between me and SmallvilleGuy, I’d fly over it. Figuratively speaking.

**SkepticGirl1:** *You are officially the best.*

**SmallvilleGuy:** *I know.*

I grinned.

**SkepticGirl1:** *Cocky. Talk to you later.*

**SmallvilleGuy:** *Actually you are officially the best. Can’t wait. Good luck on your search.*

When I stowed my phone again, I glanced over to find

## CHAPTER 7

Maddy shaking her head. “I wonder if I’ll ever have a smile like the one you’re wearing right now. Your mystery boy must be something. Is your favorite cow doing okay?”

I knew I should mention that he wasn’t going to *stay* a mystery, that he was coming here soon enough. But there were two months between now and then, and I didn’t want to rub in how happy I was that we’d defined our relationship as, well, a relationship. Not right after we’d been discussing her issues with Dante.

Besides, I spotted something up ahead that felt like the equivalent of a lightbulb going off over my head. The sign identified the single-story brick building as the West Side Metropolis Youth Homeless Shelter.

“Bess is much improved, thank you,” I said and pointed. “Let’s try up here.”

“You think . . .” Maddy said.

“It’s worth going in,” I said. “These are the kind of places that help kids whose parents don’t always report them missing.”

Just saying the words made me angry and covered in sympathetic chills at the same time. I might not always get along with Dad, but I had zero doubt that he’d try to look out for me until his dying day no matter what I did and no matter how much he disagreed with it. Whether I wanted it or approved of his methods or not.

Having a family who cared about you was the ultimate in good luck, and even bad-luck-cursed me knew it.

**There were two painfully thin boys** a couple of years younger than us sitting on the sidewalk as we approached.

The smallest almost flinched away when I bent to show him the flyer. “Any of these guys look familiar to you?” I asked as gently as I could.

He didn’t say a word. Instead he went pale, and shook his head.

“I’m sorry if I scared you,” I said. “We’re not here for anything bad. We’re just looking for them to help them. We’re, uh, not cops.”

The other kid let out a guffaw. “Figured,” he said, “since cops are older. But, y’know, people—even cute girls—asking questions is never good.”

“I beg to differ,” I said. “Asking questions is a number-one good in my world.”

The front door of the shelter swung open. “Boys, who you talking to?”

The asker was a kind-faced older man who had a steel-straight spine. Despite the kind face, I wouldn’t toy with someone who had such serious posture. I’d been around enough soldiers to recognize someone who ran a tight ship.

I straightened and walked to the door. I held the flyers in one arm and offered him my other hand. A firm handshake should go a long way with someone who had posture like that. “Lois Lane, from the *Daily Scoop*.”

He blinked, but accepted the handshake. “A little young to be a reporter, aren’t you?”

“Apparently not,” I said. “This is Maddy. We’re looking for these four teenagers—we think they may need help. Do you mind looking at the flyer?”

“I guess not,” he said. “Jeffrey here; the kids call me Mr. Jeffrey.”

He held out his hand and motioned us inside.

The corridor inside was cool, the air conditioning on full tilt, and the citrus-chemical smell meant someone worked hard to keep the place as clean as possible. The building was old, but well kept. There was a wall of taped-up artwork, drawings and paintings, some with ages marking them as the work of the very young, but others more sophisticated, missing ages as the artists got too cool to want to include that info. Voices in conversation could be heard up the hall.

It wasn’t a home, but at least it seemed like a good place. A safe one.

Mr. Jeffrey accepted a flyer from Maddy and held it up to a light. “I can’t say they jump out at me as familiar right away,” he said, continuing to consider.

I took the opportunity to walk along and peruse the row of artwork, and stopped in front of one that hit me like a mythological lightning bolt from Zeus. The style was the same as the logo on the fast kid’s backpack. There was a woman, and above her, a winged creature—a dragon, I realized on closer look. But that wasn’t the part that had stopped me in my tracks. No, it was the woman depicted in the drawing. It took me a second to realize why she was familiar.

She wore a fancy long dress and teetering heels, her hair coiled sleekly on top of her head. It was the same woman I’d seen on the street corner after my first encounter with the silver speed demon. The one who’d asked me if I was all right with that strange lilt to her voice. I’d have bet my life on it.

I pulled down the art. There didn’t seem to be a signature.

“Excuse me!” Jeffrey said, thrusting the flyer back to Maddy. “What are you doing?”

I held the piece up where he could see. “Who did this? Is the artist still here?”

“Wait a second,” he said. “Show me your pictures again.”

Maddy handed the flyer back to him, watching me wide-eyed.

After a moment, his finger hovered over the girl with brown hair. The one who had seemed capital-O-Ordinary. “Her face is a little off,” he said. “But she does favor the girl who made this drawing. Reya. Talented.”

“Is she still here?” I asked.

“Disappeared a month or so ago,” he said. “I thought maybe her parents had found her. I try to hope for the best when our kids go missing.”

“I don’t blame you,” I said.

I imagined it was far better to be optimistic, to proceed assuming wherever you could that you had cared enough, that you’d made a difference, that you would again. Dwelling on the worst was no way to live.

“Do you know who the woman is?”

His eyes went back to the drawing, then to me. “When people donate to us anonymously, our bylaws prevent us from saying anything that might identify them. We don’t even keep names on file, assuming we have them. Which we often don’t.”

*Aha.* I read that loud and clear. She’d made an anonymous donation, left no details we could pry into.

“Any idea where Reya was from originally?” Maddy chimed in.

“Afraid not.”

“Reya—will you spell the name for me?” I asked. “Can we leave a flyer up here, just in case someone else has seen her?”

Maddy handed him one to write the name on, then another when he nodded. “I’ll ask the kids to let me know if they see her around,” he said. “This number’s good?”

“Yes, but ask for Lois,” I said.

Maddy made a face, but hey, I didn’t want a real lead getting

lost in James’s deluge of calls transferred from upstairs. On second thought . . .

“Here’s my direct number. Just call me,” I said, scribbling it and my name on another of the flyers and handing it over. “Do you mind if I take the art? We want to help her. I promise.”

“I guess so,” he said, after the briefest hesitation.

“Call anytime if you think of something else,” I said. “You’ve been very helpful.”

“Good luck,” he said.

I laughed. Good luck was not something I had. Ever. But we did have our first actual lead on who one of the armor-sporting gang was. Maddy and I made our way back to the door.

“Wait!” Mr. Jeffrey called out before we were quite gone. “I remember—Reya was close with a boy. They were from the same neighborhood, I think. He would never spend the night here. He might be one of your others. I didn’t ever see him up close. But his name was Todd. She told me he was like a brother—not one, but like one.”

*Make that a lead on two of them.*

“Floppy hair?” I asked. “On just the one side?”

He nodded.

“You’re a hero,” I said, and meant every word.

Once we got outside, I looked at Maddy. “I’m thinking we narrow our search for the others to other homeless shelters. You want to shoot James and Devin a text to that effect, and that we’re headed back?”

“Who would do this, recruit homeless teens into their lab experiment?” Maddy said, shaking her head with disgust. She pulled out her phone and started to tap out the message.

“You know who I think it is,” I told her. I held up the drawing. “I took this because I’ve seen this woman. Maybe they do have new ‘parents.’ Maybe it’s her and Donovan.”

“Who is she?” Maddy asked.

“I have absolutely no idea. Yet.”

\* \* \*

The boys had beat us back to the office. James was dutifully on his desk phone when we waltzed in, probably following up on messages from way after hours the day before. And Devin was at his giant desk with its two monitors. His head swiveled between them, and he was typing and frowning, frowning and typing, as he consulted them. He didn’t even notice our entrance.

Maddy and I waved, and James waved back. She went to her desk, and I to mine.

I’d skimmed through the home page of Loose Lips on my phone on our way back and, just as SmallvilleGuy had said, the only new posts about people seeing weird stuff referred to things that had happened the day before. Our silver-armor gang seemed to have remained out of sight today.

The whole thing made me uneasy. What were they up to?  
And who was that woman?

I didn’t like not having the full story, or having to just wait for our attackers to pop back up. I was eager to debrief the

boys more fully, see if they’d gotten any information we could use. But first, I had a phone call to make.

The information I’d read online about Stryker’s Island visiting requests had recommended using a landline instead of a cell phone. So I went to my desk, pulled out my notepad, and dialed the number.

“Visitor relations.” The woman on the other end was nonsense, with a voice that was impossible to read.

“Um, I’m a journalist—”

“We don’t permit media into the facility except by prisoner or administration request. I can transfer you to the PR department—”

“Hang on. I’d like to be added to Moxie Mannheim’s visitor list,” I said as confidently as possible after the two of us competed to interrupt each other.

No-nonsense paused. “Has he requested a visit from you?”

“Uh, no, I’m calling to ask that he permit me to visit him.”

A moment of silence. “Name.”

“Lois Lane,” I said.

“Are you a minor?”

“Yes. I’m sixteen.”

“Address and phone number.”

I rattled them off.

“Lois Lane, sixteen years old, Metropolis resident, requesting to be added to Moxie Mannheim’s visitor list.” She read back my phone number.

“That’s right. When, uh, can I expect to hear?”

“You’ll hear if it’s approved.”

And click.

Maddy was watching me when I replaced the receiver. “You gave it a shot,” she said, her giant headphones around her neck.

“We’ll see what happens.”

Why *would* Moxie Mannheim agree to see me? Maybe he was curious about the girl who’d sent him up the river. I hoped so.

Devin looked over at me, and I could tell by his somber expression that something was up. “Dev, what is it?”

“You want to step out into the hall?” he asked, finishing up copying something down from the monitor in front of him. Then he stared at me.

“What’s this?” Maddy asked.

“Uh, it’s private stuff,” Devin said.

There could be no doubt what it was about. Or, rather, who. TheInventor. But Maddy didn’t know that, and she raised her eyebrows.

My palms started to get clammy. That look on Devin’s face was no good. I was afraid.

“Private stuff of mine. I asked Devin to do me a favor,” I said, hearing how thin my voice was. I channeled bluster that belonged to a different moment. “You fill in James on what we found out.”

James and Maddy exchanged a glance, but didn’t object.

If Devin’s news couldn’t wait, I was certain I wouldn’t be too thrilled about whatever it was. I followed him out into the

hallway. It was darker than our office; they’d turned half of the ceiling fluorescent panels off as a cost-savings measure. We were the only ones regularly down here.

“What’d he do?” I asked.

Devin’s face stayed grim. “You were right that I’d know it when I saw it.”

He handed me the piece of paper he’d been writing on. It was a list of usernames I recognized from Strange Skies, along with cities or states. But I gasped when I focused in enough to read it. There on the first line:

*SmallvilleGuy – Smallville or region, Kansas*

My vision swam, and his username was all I could see.

“Explain,” I said, my whole body going cold. I tore my eyes away from the page. “What is this?”

“It’s a list this dude sent to someone in the government,” Devin said. “Defense department, I think, or maybe military. I wasn’t about to breach those firewalls to find out. Lois, he didn’t even try to hide it. I think he *wanted* us to see. And I’m getting nothing now. He disabled the worm.”

I gaped at Devin, then put two and two together. After that private message to me, it made sense. “He figured out we were spying on him. This is retaliation.”

“Looks that way.” Devin frowned. “The context that went with that list was a list of Strange Skies users of likely interest and the cities he thinks they live in. The response from the government contact was an enthusiastic thanks for reopening communications. That was all I could see.”

“This is bad.” I didn’t know what to do first, where to go. I paced a few steps and doubled back, thinking. Then the answer hit me. “I have to go home.”

“Okay. But did you read the whole list?” he asked.

“No, I’ve seen what I need.” I started to walk past him.

“Read the whole list.”

I skimmed down the full list, seven names total, not sure what had been so urgent until I reached the last line.

*SkepticGirl1 – Metropolis*

My blood froze.

“I have to go.”

I started past him again, and he gently took my arm. “You want your stuff?”

“Oh, yeah,” I nodded. My thoughts were spinning a million miles an hour.

SmallvilleGuy was number one on the list. And there was my name at the end. Who knew what else TheInventor might pony up to the military? And now we wouldn’t be tipped off about it. He must have sent me that link to the Loose Lips post to get my paranoia started. He’d known that we’d discover this.

This was a disaster in the making.

When we came back into the office, James and Maddy peered over at us. Maddy got up. “What’d you do to Lois?”

Devin said, “Nothing, but she has to leave.”

“I do.” I slung my messenger bag strap over my shoulder, my brain stuck in overdrive. I texted Taxi Jack and asked him to pick me up outside. He responded immediately: *Be right there.*

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” I said.

“Okay,” Maddy said, frowning in concern. “Text if you need anything.”

“We’re all here for you,” James put in.

“Thanks, guys,” I said. “Right now, I just need . . . to get home.”

I needed to figure out how to prevent the catastrophe my snooping might have brought down on us. I didn’t know SmallvilleGuy’s reasons for holding his identity so close or exactly what his connection to the flying man was. But I knew someone snooping around his hometown wasn’t good news. He had something to hide, and I trusted his reasons. He wouldn’t take this well.

And then there was the idea of Dad looking for SkepticGirl1, aka me, and discovering that I hadn’t kept quiet about what we’d seen in Kansas that night.

I was in too much of a hurry to wait for our uber-slow elevator, so I found the stairwell door and pounded up to the lobby. Stopping myself from running to the doors wasn’t easy, but I managed to just walk extremely fast to them.

Where I stopped. Through the glass, I saw a boy waiting outside. I recognized his haircut right away. The boy Jeffrey had said was named Todd. He was leaning against the wall of the building next door, along the path I typically took to the curb. A girl stood beside him, and since her hands weren’t silver I realized she must be the laser vision girl—the fact she wore oversized sunglasses that hid her eyes was enough to confirm it.

*Gotcha.* I dug out my phone and texted Devin: *Do you have the cell I gave you before ready? Can you bring it to the lobby ASAP? Typhon duo out front.*

No one, not even Speedy Todd, was going to stop me from getting home to deal with my emergency. But I could risk a brief, hopefully profitable delay.

Devin, with Maddy and James in tow, appeared in the lobby a couple of minutes later. I stepped back to avoid us being spotted and pointed to where the boy and girl lounged. A flash of Todd's silver foot was visible as he shifted against the wall.

"I'll get the phone on him. You guys stay in here." I held out my hand to Devin, palm open.

He put the phone in it, but then said, "I think someone else should go with you. There are two of them and only one of you."

Maddy nodded and said, "I can."

"No, I should," James said.

"No, none of you should. You guys will be right here if anything goes wrong. Just grab a security guard. I'll . . . flash you a peace sign if I need help."

James narrowed his eyes. "Why a peace sign?"

"I don't know, because it's the first thing I thought of." I made sure the phone was on, then turned. "I don't want to start a war, I want to help these guys. Here I go."

I shoved open the door and started on my usual route across the concrete plaza toward the curb, trying to appear as normal as possible. On cue, Todd peeled away from the wall

and burst toward me with uncanny quickness. He had his backpack on again.

I jerked my head back in pretend shock, but when he got close—

I dove for him. Grabbed hold of his arm.

The force of his movement pulled me with him for a moment, before he stopped. "Let go, and we'll let you follow us. But only you," he said. "Alone."

I was tempted, despite this being a clear trap. What would Nellie Bly do?

The girl with the sunglasses had caught up with us, and now she took them off. "Just come with us," she said, her voice quiet, thin. I saw a faint glow from her eyes, the silver mask molded around them like skin.

"I'll have to pass for now," I said, grabbing Todd tighter with my free hand. He started to grapple with me in an attempt to get loose. I glanced at the Daily Planet Building, but no one was running out.

*Good job, guys.*

I managed to let him twist away, to a perfect angle for me to grab for the backpack's zipper and shove the phone into the inside pocket. The girl lingered to the side, the boy's body blocking her view of what I'd done. We only needed them not to discover it right away.

"Get off," he said, and pulled away.

A blaring honk sounded. Then another: *Honk! Honk!*

I spotted Taxi Jack at the curb, and then he escalated

the honking, leaning on the horn so it became a constant blare.

“Catch you next time, Todd,” I said, and he shot me a confused look. I hesitated, and then turned to the girl. “What’s your name? I know you’re not Reya.” I watched to see how it landed.

“No, I’m Sunny,” she said, confused.

Todd had paused, taken aback. “You don’t know us. Not any of us,” he said.

Then he took the girl’s—Sunny’s—hand and darted away, across the plaza. They disappeared into the sidewalk traffic. Apparently they’d given up on luring me along for now.

I had all their first names except the winged guy’s. Wherever they were headed, they’d report we had found out information about the group.

*Tell away. Maybe Donovan will escalate into doing something really stupid.*

Jack eased off the horn, and I aimed a subtle—I hoped, in case any of the other silvery teens were hidden nearby—thumbs-up toward the front doors of the Daily Planet Building.

Mission accomplished, I booked it and climbed into the backseat of the taxi.

“New boyfriend?” Taxi Jack asked, and I could tell he was concerned. As always, his worrying about me was sweet.

“New story,” I said. “Getting my edge back. Home, please? As fast as you can get me there?”

“No problem.” Taxi Jack levered the car into drive and turned his head to find a break in the steady flow of cars.

I pulled out my phone and sent a group text to Maddy, James, and Devin: *Wait for me before you try to track them down. Got it? We’ll do it tomorrow. Together.*

Devin sent back: *It’ll take a while for me to get the data anyway.*

I nodded and tapped out another message: *The masked girl is named Sunny. Maybe try to see if the name turns up a hit? Maddy has two more.*

My phone dinged with a solo message from Maddy that said: *Good luck with whatever had you looking so worried. Here if you need to talk.*

Having friends was weird . . . but in a good way.

Taxi Jack broke into my train of thought. “I’m just glad to hear you’re not dating that guy.”

“Please,” I said. “Like I’d ever.”

No, the only person I wanted to date was in potentially grave danger, depending on his reasons for extreme secrecy. And I was the only person who could warn him.

I hesitated, then sent another message. Even though for all I knew TheInventor could see it, since he’d designed this chat app, along with our computer chat software, and Strange Skies.

**SkepticGirl1:** *I need to talk to you in the game. On my way home now. It’s important.*