

# Hattie and Mr. X — Matchmaker Chronicles Vol. 1 - P

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: This story takes place in the Matchmaker Chronicles universe. Hattie Kaplin has had a long-standing relationship with Jon Kent and the entire Kent family; in fact she is almost part of the family. Recently she had been brought in on the family secret that the Kents are in fact the super family.

Disclaimers: Some of the characters in this story are property of DC, December 3rd productions and Warner Bros., except those I created. No copyright infringement is intended. I have just borrowed the characters for a short time.

Note:

I want to thank my beta reader, Artemis for her help on this.

This story is a sequel to Hattie Kaplin and the Main Street Bomber — Matchmaker Chronicles Volume 1 — O and takes place approximately one year after that story.

\*denotes emphasis\*

<denotes thoughts>

/' denotes telepathic communications.\*/

/\* xxx\*/ denotes playback of a recording

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## Chapter 1 — Birthday Party

February 28, 2029

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Universal Locator designation

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

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It was five in the evening and Hattie looked over at her partner, JJ, whose desk was just across from hers, and saw that he was shutting down his workstation. Looking at her watch she decided that she needed to do the same thing if they were to get to the party on time.

As she was shutting down her system she pulled out a box of expensive chocolates from her desk drawer. She had been rationing them, limiting herself to one piece a day so that they would last. Taking her time as she picked out the piece for today, she smiled. The box had been a Valentine's Day gift along with a dozen long stemmed red roses from her fiancé, Jimmy Junior. She popped the piece of chocolate into her mouth and closed her eyes in rapture, savoring the flavor as it melted in her mouth. After two minutes of blissful enjoyment she finally opened her eyes to see JJ leaning on her desk, a smile on his face, watching her. She smiled and said, "Whoever said that Valentine's Day is only one day of the year? I was just reliving it. Thank you!" She closed the distance between them and gave him a kiss.

There were two very interested observers. Lois and Clark were both in the process of preparing to leave when they saw the scene unfold. Lois looked at Clark and said, "Guess who they remind me of?"

"It took us a couple of years to get to that point."

"They had an advantage. They've known and liked each other since they were teens. Teaming them up was a good move on our part."

Clark moved over and gave Lois a hug as he said, "My little matchmaker."

Lois inclined her head in their direction as she said, "That match was made long before we put them together."

Clark said, "I wonder why they're leaving so early. The party isn't for a few hours yet."

Lois shook her head at the reminiscence as she said, "I'm glad I gave up, long ago, on trying to throw a surprise birthday party for you. The one time you were surprised, we were both caught off guard practically ripping each other's clothes off when the lights went on and everyone was yelling 'Surprise!' I was mortified! Ah well. Don't worry, they will be at the party, but they have a karate class first. Hattie is preparing for testing for her third dan black belt. Jimmy has been working hard and pretty soon will test for his first dan brown belt. He has progressed through the ranks very rapidly. Hattie has been working with him to hone his skills and it has helped her prepare for her own test."

Chuckling, Clark said, "I guess he decided he needed to learn karate in order to keep up with her. He already knew Judo."

Lois added, "He's been teaching her some of that. By the time they are finished, they could be unstoppable in a fight."

Thoughtfully, Clark added, "They have been able to take care of themselves in the skirmishes they have been involved in." He continued, "You know, it seems like the criminals are becoming even more violent than when we were doing investigations. I am still concerned. In the last year Kam-El has had to save her when she was thrown off the top of a building, Ultra Woman had to save her from being blown up, Superman saved them both from dying in a car wreck when the crooks ran them off the road and over a cliff, Kam-El kept her from being shot by a sniper; it's a good thing he happened to be patrolling there at that time.

Lois interrupted, "Jon caught that bullet just inches from her body and was able to catch the sniper, but he either wouldn't or couldn't identify the one that put him up to it."

Clark resumed, "Yeah, if he would have talked we might have gotten somewhere by now. Ultra Woman saved her again, this time from being run down by a hit and run driver; again, he wouldn't talk and last but not least, just last week, they were tied up and I pulled both of them off a boat that was about to explode." He started to chuckle. "I have always said that you and she are like two peas in a pod, but as hard as it may be to believe, I think she has actually outdone you in the number of times she's had to be rescued."

"Do you think that she is taking unnecessary chances?"

Clark still had a thoughtful expression as he continued, "Actually, I'm sure there's more to it than that. It looks like there is a concerted effort on the part of someone to do away with our girl and they are going to extremes. Hiring a sniper isn't something that could be called an accident. She has ruffled someone's feathers and they are trying to get rid of her."

In a very excited tone, Lois said, "We need to find out who it is and put them behind bars!"

Clark was confident as he answered, "I'm sure Hattie is working on just that. Come on, we need to get home so that we can get ready for our guests."

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At 6:30 Hattie was unlocking the door to her apartment. When she had opened the last lock she gave the door a little shove, turned around and put her arms around JJ's neck and gave him a kiss. After several minutes they broke the kiss; because

both of them needed air. She leaned her head into his chest and breathed deeply in an attempt to overcome the oxygen deficit and once she had recovered somewhat she started to giggle. Finally she was able to say, "Either we have to learn to breathe through our noses while we kiss or make our kisses shorter."

Breathlessly, JJ replied, "I wonder how Aunt Lois and Uncle Clark do it. I've seen them in a lip lock for five minutes at a time."

Hattie laughed and replied in a whisper, "They can each hold their breath for a lllllloooooonnnnnnggggg time."

JJ laughed and said, "I guess that does make a difference."

Hattie closed the distance and gave JJ another, this time shorter, kiss and said, "We need to change and get ready for the party."

"I'll pick you up in half an hour. Has the insurance company told you when they will settle on your car?"

"Yeah, next week. They have threatened to put me into a high risk category if I wreck another one. This is the third one this year." In an exasperated tone she continued, "None of them were even my fault. It all started when they blew up my car when the head of MetroServe tried to kill me. The second one was when we were following that car so that we could spy on their meeting and that other car ran us off the road and off the cliff. Superman got us out while we were still falling. He didn't bother with the car because it would have been totaled anyhow. Then there was that hit and run with the driver using an armored car, no less. He was trying to crush us. Fortunately, Ultra Woman stopped him and got us out of the wreck before the gas tank exploded."

"Okay, I'll be back in half an hour." JJ turned and headed for the stairwell. Fortunately he was only on the next floor with his apartment directly over Hattie's.

Twenty-five minutes later JJ was back in front of her door and knocking. He heard her opening the locks as she said, "Just a sec."

When she opened the door she stepped back to let him in. She was drying her hair from a shower and all she had on was a towel. When she lifted her hands to use the towel on her hair it lifted the hem of the one around her body and opened it along her side, which afforded JJ a generous peek at her. Noting his stare she did a slow pirouette and asked, "Like what you see?"

"You know it," he said with feeling.

Looking at the ring on her left hand, she replied, "Just a few more months, then what you see is what you get."

He replied, "I am having a hard time waiting. What if something happens to one or both of us? Look at how many times we've almost been killed in the last year."

"We just have to take that chance. I wanted to wait so that the wedding night would be special." Suddenly a memory came to her mind and she said, "Wait right here," and in a flash of pink flesh she scampered into her bedroom.

Once in her bedroom she dropped the towel from around her body, pulled open her dresser drawer and drew out a royal blue lacy bra and matching lacy thong. After donning these she grabbed a sea green terry cloth robe that reached to her knees and put it on.

Walking back into the living room, in a saucy tone she asked, "Would you like a preview?"

Mystified, he asked, "Preview of what?"

With a mischievous grin she replied, "Our wedding night."

"I don't know. I'm already having a hard time controlling myself. If you entice me any more, I may not be held responsible for my actions."

"Just keep in mind that this is look, but don't touch. This is just a preview with the emphasis on \*view\*."

"Okay, I'll try to keep that in mind."

Hattie put her hands on his arms and guided him to one side of the living room and then she moved to the other side. Once there she turned her back to him and loosened the robe. Slowly

she slid the robe off of one shoulder, revealing the strap of the bra and a part of her back. Sliding the robe off the other shoulder, she allowed it to fall to her waist with her arms still in the sleeves and looked coyly over her right shoulder. Judging his reaction, she lowered her arms and allowed the robe to fall to the floor.

JJ's eyes flew wide and his mouth fell open in a gasp. She was standing there almost nude, just a thin band around her waist and another at her back. He couldn't believe how beautiful her body was. He had seen her in her workout gear, but this was her virtually unadorned body.

Slowly she turned towards him and she watched as he started to breathe heavily and sweat. The bra she was wearing enhanced without really covering and the thong was so brief and both were of such a sheer very fine lace that virtually nothing was hidden.

Once she was completely facing him, in a throaty, sultry, tone she asked, "You like?" Looking at him and seeing his reaction, she already knew the answer to her question. When she had been looking back over her shoulder she had seen his body's reaction. Now that she was facing him she could almost see his reaction increase.

All he could get out was, "Wow," in a hushed tone. Unconsciously he took a half step in her direction and his hands reached for her.

Smiling, she said, "Hold on, tiger. Remember, I said, 'Look, but don't touch'. This was just a preview." She bent and picked up her robe and when she did she displayed her assets just that much more. Her smile persisted, a very satisfied smile. This was the reaction she had been hoping for almost a year ago when she had dressed similarly for the superhero Kam-El. Of course, at that time she didn't know that Kam-El was actually her best friend Jon Kent. At that time he was about to be married to Jennifer and they were living together, but that night she had learned the truth. He hadn't so much as looked at her and that rejection had hurt. JJ was most definitely looking. Her ego had smarted under Kam-El's rejection, at least until she had been told the family secret. Now, with JJ, seeing his reaction, her ego was receiving quite a boost.

JJ said, "Do we have to wait? I mean, we could elope tonight."

Her joy was bubbling up and was evident in her tone as she teased, "What, and miss your uncle's birthday party?" as she put the robe back on.

"After seeing you like that, I don't think I want to wait until June."

She reached down and laid her hand over the very prominent bulge in the front of his pants. As she did, he jumped. "Just remember what I looked like and let me go put on some clothes."

"I'm going to have a hard time concentrating on anything other than the memory of what you look like."

Hattie put her hand gently on the side of his cheek and slid it along his jaw line as she said, again using a sultry tone, "Just keep in mind that under the clothes I'm about to put on, I'm wearing," she opened the robe again for him to see, "this." When he reached for her again she giggled, closed the robe, scampered out of his reach and into her bedroom. Two minutes later she emerged wearing a scoop neck blouse that showed off a lot of cleavage and an ankle length wrap skirt. It was February, after all. As she walked, the side where the skirt overlapped would open as a slit and reveal her shapely leg to his view.

Seeing her, JJ thought, <I'm in big trouble. She's teasing me deliberately. I hope I can hold out.>

JJ helped her with her coat and then they moved downstairs and out to JJ's car for the trip to the, Wisteria Lane Kent home. JJ held the door for her and Hattie gracefully got into the passenger side. Once JJ was behind the steering wheel and she saw him glance in her direction, she slowly crossed her legs which opened the slit in the wrap skirt on his side all the way to her hip, giving him a view of her entire leg. She grinned as she watched him

staring at her display. She could see a hungry look in his eyes and it sent a shiver up her spine. The thought of having someone want her that much ... she just couldn't believe her good fortune.

For so long, she had thought that \*Jon\* was the one. She had to admit to herself that she had fallen in love with Jon Kent the first day they met, all those years ago in middle school, but unfortunately, that was never to be. She had learned, later that it was a Kryptonian thing, a love at first sight and if it didn't happen then, it just wouldn't. She was destined never to be his wife and lover, but to always be just his friend and pretty soon, his cousin. She had spent a lot of time with Jon and Lara and the rest of the family through the years and fortunately for her that had included JJ. Now she and JJ were engaged to be married in just a few months.

She was starting to have second thoughts, herself, about waiting and seeing how eager he was just weakened her resolve that much more. She knew that Jon and Jen had lived together for about six months before they had gotten married and look at how happy they were. They were blissfully happy, as were Lara and Mike. They had been married now for several years. They had married while in college and she had worked to put him through law school and then he had returned the favor. Now they worked together at the same law firm in LA.

Hattie had found out that fateful night why Jon and Jen had decided on living together before the wedding. It was ultimately for her safety. The modification of her body's physiology by his Kryptonian aura was approximately a three-year process. Once her body had been changed, by using the pendant she would also be super and safe from criminals that might attack the members of the family if their secret identities were ever revealed. It was a simple idea; the sooner they started living together, the sooner she would be super and safe.

Coming out of her reverie, she realized that JJ hadn't even started the engine and she was starting to get cold. He was still staring at her leg with that hungry look in his eyes. She reached down and pulled the bottom of her coat over, effectively concealing her leg, and JJ snapped out of his almost hypnotic state. Hattie said, "At this rate we will never make it to the party. I'm sorry, JJ, I shouldn't be teasing you this way. I'm not being very kind, am I?"

"No, please don't stop. I don't mind at all. I just wish I had Uncle Clark's powers. Right now I could use a swim in the arctic."

Hattie burst out in tinkling laughter and JJ thought it was the sweetest music he had ever heard.

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A little later that evening at the party, Hattie asked if she and JJ could speak with Lois and Clark, in private.

Once in the office, Hattie addressed Lois, "I'm planning my wedding party." Lois nodded. "I'd like you to be my Matron of Honor."

Lois smiled and said, "I thought you would be asking Lara or perhaps Jen. Are you sure you want me? Lara has always been your best girlfriend and you were in Jen's wedding party."

Hattie replied without even needing to give her answer any thought, "I've known for a long time that you were the one I would want up there with me. Even before I met Jon, you were my hero and role model. In the years since ... well ... I've gotten to know you and, I have to be honest, I really love you. You've always been like a mother to me and I can't think of anyone that I would rather have stand with me when I join this family. It just wouldn't feel right having anyone else there."

JJ chimed in, "Please say yes, Aunt Lois, because otherwise I won't be able to have the best man that I want." He turned to Clark and asked, "Uncle Clark, would you be my best man? My dad will be there, but you're the one I want to stand with me."

Clark looked at Lois and said, "I think I can speak for the both of us when I say, we accept and we are honored that you

have asked us to do this."

Hattie threw her arms around Lois and started to weep for joy. Lois pulled her into a hug and said, "Hattie girl, you have made me very happy. I have to be mother of the bride or groom for our kids. This is going to be a special day, for both of us."

JJ shook Clark's hand and said, "Thanks, Uncle Clark. I appreciate you doing this for me."

Going back out into the main room, Lois called for everyone's attention.

"Listen up. Hattie has just asked me to be her Matron of Honor."

Hattie was surprised. She expected a response of disappointment from Lara or perhaps Jen, but instead both of them smiled and congratulated their mom. No matter how long she would know this family, they continued to surprise her. Their attitude of selfless service and the total lack of animosity continually amazed her. She just hoped that she fit in. Even as she was thinking this she saw how Lois was looking at her and realized that yes, she did belong in this family. She had been with them for sixteen years, more than half of her life, and it felt so natural here, even more than her own. She just felt like she belonged here. She wasn't super, but that wasn't important. It was the people, not the powers that made this family what it was and she got a warm, comfortable feeling just being with them. She just couldn't imagine being with anyone else for the rest of her life.

Lara, Jen, Celeste, Jessica and Lucy all came over and congratulated her and as they did, each was added to the wedding party.

While the girls were gathered, JJ asked each of his cousins to be ushers. Thus the wedding party was balanced out.

The girls took Lois and Hattie into another room so that they could start planning the wedding.

The guys all gathered around the TV and put on the Metropolis Hoopsters / Gotham Growlers game.

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## Chapter 2 — Who or What is the Mysterious 'X'?

Wednesday, February 28, 2029

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After the party JJ had dropped Hattie off at her apartment, but only after a lingering goodnight kiss which left both of them breathless.

As she was preparing for bed, Hattie was thinking, hard. So much had happened that evening. She lay down, but she had a hard time getting to sleep. She kept thinking about JJ and his reaction to her display of her body to his perusal. She tossed and turned for what seemed like hours before finally dropping off into a troubled sleep. She dreamed about JJ and how, on their wedding night, he would carry her to the bed, rip her clothes off of her and make wild passionate love to her. She woke up moaning in a sweat of passion. Her nether regions were a throbbing. She had never been so aroused in her entire life. She hastily got out of bed and removed her soaked pajamas. She looked at herself in the mirror, turning side to side and looking over her back trying to get the full picture. Finally fully satisfied that she had nothing to be ashamed of in that respect she decided to handle her arousal by exercise.

She moved into her living room and, still nude, moved the coffee table from the center of the room and started practicing the kata that she would have to perform for her grading. After going through all three, four times each, she was sweating and weary from the exercise. She hastened into the shower. Just as she was about to turn the water on she heard the shower in the apartment above go on. She smiled as she thought to herself, <Looks like JJ is having a hard time sleeping too. I wonder if it's for the same reason.>

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After dropping Hattie off at her apartment and kissing her

goodnight, JJ had gone to his apartment and after changing for bed tried to sleep, but the image of Hattie, wearing only that see through bra and thong was driving him crazy. The more he thought about her the more he knew he had a problem.

Finally he gave up on any thoughts of going to sleep right away. He decided that he would have to distract himself somehow. He went into his living room and started practicing the kata that he was having a problem mastering. He knew that he had to be able to perform it at least nearly perfectly in order to win his next belt. He started off moving slowly, almost as if he were practicing Tai Chi, so slow were his movements. After going through it four times that way he started to speed up his movements. After another four times, at just about full speed, he called it quits and decided that he needed to take an ice-cold shower. He removed his sleep shorts and turned on the shower. This was what Hattie heard.

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March 01, 2029

In the morning she awoke, but it had not been restful slumber. She simply lay there awake in bed for a time, thinking. The emotional upheaval that had prevented Hattie from getting her sleep had resolved itself, at least partially. She thought she had made a decision, but she still wasn't sure that it was the right one. She decided to let circumstances decide the matter.

When she finally got up, before she even got dressed she placed a call. The final outcome of the call still left her in a quandary and she decided that she would have to think about it some more, before she said anything.

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At 9 a.m. JJ knocked on her door. As soon as he did, he heard the locks being undone. The door opened and before he even had a chance to say 'Hi,' Hattie thrust a travel mug of coffee into his hands and said, "Let's go, partner, we're gonna be late."

In a halfway mocking tone JJ said, "Good morning, JJ. Did you sleep well? You look good today. New shirt? New tie? Hi Hattie! Yes, it is a good morning isn't it? Yes, I slept well ..."

Hattie rolled her eyes and said, "Sorry. Good morning, JJ."

JJ asked, "Is there a problem, Hattie? Did I say or do something?"

She looked down at her feet and said in a shy tone, "No, you didn't do anything. It ... it's me. I'm ... Well, I'm not sure."

JJ stopped and spun around. He put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Please don't tell me you're planning to call it off."

A shocked expression took over her face and she quickly said, "NO! No, that's not it! No, that's one thing I'm very sure of. It's ... it's something else."

"Whew, you had me worried there for a second. Okay, you can tell me. Maybe I can help."

"We can talk about it later. Let's get to work."

"If you say so. Whenever you want to talk about it, I'm here."

She laid her hand on his cheek and said, "I know you are, and I promise, I'll talk to you about it, just not right now."

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When they arrived at work, Hattie found that she had a voice-mail from Graham Kerr, Bobby Bigmouth's son and her main stoolie, asking for a noontime meeting. She called JJ over and played the message a second time so that he could listen. She asked, "What should we get him?"

"Hmmm, lunchtime. How about a Double Bacon, Double Cheese Burger Supreme from Hank's?"

"Yes, with fries, apple pie and a drink. That ought to satisfy him." Looking at her watch she said, "I'll call the order in for pick-up for lunch. Mmmmmmm, just thinking about that burger is making me hungry. Maybe we could go there ourselves."

JJ said, "Not exactly a quiet place to talk, if you wanted to talk about whatever it was that was bothering you, if you want to talk about it that is."

"JJ, I do want to talk about it, just ... Now isn't the time.

Maybe later."

"I'm a patient guy. I can wait. How much later?"

Hattie giggled because his protests of patience were very impatiently given. She figured that if she didn't give him some timeframe he would continue to pester her about it all day so she said, "Take me out someplace nice for dinner and we'll talk afterwards, okay?"

"Nice dinner, then talk, okay." Now he just needed to figure out where to take her.

Hattie's phone rang as JJ was moving back to his desk.

"Daily Planet, Kaplin." It was one of her contacts at the MPD.

"Listen, Kaplin, this is Boyce; last night we had the strangest robbery that I ever heard of. This guy, a young lawyer no less, walks into a jewelry store and sticks it up. He is ID'd from the security cam footage. He was picked up this morning, no jewels and he claims not to know anything about it."

Hattie had been taking notes and asked, "Was he arrested?"

"Yeah, we have too much evidence against him not to. Aside from the camera footage his fingerprints are all over the place."

"Did you confront him with the video footage?"

"Yeah, and he still claimed to not know anything about it. Says it must be someone made up to look like him."

"Is that a possibility?"

"Not a chance. We figure it's a dodge to try and get out of it. The problem is that the guy would not have any possible motive for pulling the job. He works in a big firm and was just made a full partner. He's rolling in dough. Unmarried, not a gambler, doesn't do drugs. He just doesn't fit the profile for someone that would do something like this."

"Is he going to have a psych eval?"

"Yeah, he has an appointment with the shrink this afternoon."

"Please keep me posted."

"No problem. I appreciated that write up you did on me when I made that arrest last week. I wound up with a citation for it. Got a bump in rank and pay, thanks to you. I'll be in touch."

Hattie was thoughtful as she hung the phone up. She smiled; this was just what she and JJ needed to take their minds off of the events of the previous evening. She called him over, "Hey, JJ, got a minute?"

He said, "For you I have as many minutes as you require," as he arose and moved over beside her desk. She pointed to her guest chair and he sat.

"Remember Boyce?"

"We did a story about him last week, didn't we?"

"That's him. He was a plainclothes cop that broke that case. He just called to thank us for the story. He got some bennies from our story and he was repaying the favor. The MPD just made an arrest in a weird case. A guy with no motive robbed a jewelry store and he claims to have no memory of doing it."

"Is he claiming amnesia?"

"No, he claims that he is innocent. They got him on the security tape, but he claims it isn't him."

"This sounds like some kind of mystery. I think we need to interview this guy."

"I agree with you." She glanced at her watch. "It's nearly lunchtime. You think we could go and get lunch and then meet Graham?"

"Okay with me."

Hattie headed for the office. It looked like Lois saw her approach, although she really knew that it was probably Lois' superhearing that tipped her off as to Hattie's approach. Lois signed for her to enter.

Hattie stepped in and said, "I just had a call from MPD. Weird robbery that we're going to look into. Also, I had a call from Graham Kerr, he asked for a lunchtime meeting. We're headed out."

Lois smiled and said, "Ask him to give my regards to Bobby, will you?"

Hattie smiled as she replied, “Sure thing. I don’t know how long we will be gone. We may stop by the precinct and interview the guy they arrested to get a feel for the story.”

Lois nodded and said, “Try to stay out of trouble for a change.”

“Awww, come on. You know that none of those were my fault. Someone has it in for me and JJ.”

“I know and that is what has us concerned. Over the last year, watching out for you and JJ has become almost a full time job. It’s a good thing that there’s more than one of us and we can share the load.”

Hattie saw the smile that Lois had as she was speaking and knew that she was teasing so she didn’t take any offense. She replied, “Maybe you should make me and JJ super, then your problems would be solved.”

With a serious expression, Lois replied, “You don’t know what you are asking. I don’t know any way we could do that, but are you sure you would really want that, if we could? There’s a lot of responsibility that goes along with the powers.”

“I know that and I also know that there probably is no way for it to happen, but if it did, I think we would handle it. If I had married Jon instead of Jen and had been made super as a result, well ... I think I would have been ready, but there’s no way that will happen now and JJ’s from the wrong side of the family for that to happen, he’s an Olsen not a Kent.”

Lois smiled and said, “In many ways he’s more Kent than Olsen, just not that way. He’s been with us so much over the years, more than his brothers and sisters, that his personality is different from his siblings. I guess we rubbed off on him. Maybe that’s a good thing, time will tell. Anyhow, just be careful out there, at least until you find out who is after you and we get them.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be careful. Gotta go. We’re gonna catch lunch before we meet up with Graham.”

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Hattie and JJ were sitting in JJ’s car around the corner from the main entrance to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They had only parked a minute earlier when there was a knock on Hattie’s door. JJ hit the switch that unlocked the doors and Graham climbed into the back. He challenged, “What’s with the locked doors? Don’t you trust me or something?”

Hattie laughed and said, “It’s not that, it’s just that there have been so many attempts on our lives in the last year that we are trying to be extra careful.”

“Yeah, I heard something about that. You’ve really ticked someone off.”

“Don’t we know it. Well, what do you have for us?”

“I don’t know, but it may be related to your situation.”

Hattie was suddenly very eager to hear what he had to say. “Come on, don’t keep us in suspense. What do you have for us?”

“That depends, what do you have for me?”

“How does a Double Bacon, Double Cheese Burger Supreme with fries, apple pie and a drink from Hank’s sound?”

“Sounds like we’re talking business. Okay, here’s what I have. There are rumors on the street about ‘X’.”

Mystified, Hattie looked at him in disbelief. She snatched away the bag she was about to hand to him. She challenged, “‘X’? That’s all you have for us, just a letter? ‘X’ could stand for anything. You’ve gotta do better than that.” With a look of defiance, she deliberately reached into the bag, pulled out a fry and stuck it into her mouth and chewed.

Seeing his payment start to disappear, Graham said, “Look, don’t be hasty. ‘X’ is more than a letter, it’s a name. ‘X’ could be the one behind all of these attacks on you. The word on the street is that he has started buying up parts of the old Luthor Empire. He could have been behind MetroServe and its attack on you. I think he’s behind MiraLabs as well. He’s been slowly buying up controlling interests in those businesses.”

Hattie extracted another fry and turning to JJ, waving the fry in her hand like a teacher waving a ruler at a student, she said, “That could fit. All of this started when I busted MetroStaff and proved their collusion with MiraLabs in that corporate espionage caper. That was shortly before you joined the Planet.” She popped the fry in her mouth and chewed thoughtfully for a few seconds, swallowed and absent-mindedly pulled out another fry and placed it in her mouth before turning back to Graham. Once she swallowed she said, “You said he was also buying influence?”

She was starting to put her hand back into the bag when Graham reached over the seat back and grabbed her hand, stopping her. She looked at her hand, partly in the bag, with his holding it and suddenly realized what she had been doing. She started to blush, closed the bag and handed it to Graham. “Sorry, I wasn’t thinking. No wonder I’m feeling so full. You say he is also buying influence?”

“Right, political influence.”

Hattie turned to JJ and said, “I wonder if Robbins was on his payroll. It looked like it was businesses downtown, but we were never able to get any actual names and no convictions as accessories. What if that was all a blind and it was really this ‘X’ that was behind Robbins the whole time? I always thought we found those documents that showed the plan to embezzle the money from the bond sale too easily. What if they were planted so that we would find them?”

JJ rebutted, “It may have been, but he’s definitely the one that taped that bomb to your hands, so he was still guilty of all of those deaths.”

“Right, we got him on that, but he could have been innocent of the other.” Turning back to Graham, she challenged, “Okay, just who is ‘X’?”

“‘X’, that’s all I know at this point.”

“It has to stand for something! ‘X’ as in ‘X’ marks the spot, ‘X’ as in cross. If it was ‘XX’ that would be double cross. Something!”

JJ offered, “What if it’s an initial? ‘X’ something. Something like Xavier or Xandra or Ximena,” snapping his fingers, he added, “how about Xena?” Shaking his head he said, “I’ve run out of names that start with ‘X’.”

Hattie turned back to Graham and said, “We need more information. Tell you what, get us a name and it’s a full dinner at Travaglini’s, pasta, wine, dessert, the works. A sit down dinner, not take out.”

Graham smiled in anticipation and said, “Stick by the phone. As soon as I have something it will be ringing.” He grabbed the door handle and let himself out.

JJ smiled to himself; he had just decided where to take Hattie for dinner.

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### Chapter 3 — A Strange Robbery

Thursday afternoon, March 01, 2029

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After Graham departed, JJ drove them to the Twelfth Precinct where the robbery suspect was being held.

As they were entering, Hattie spotted Boyce. She headed in his direction and he spotted her as she approached.

He moved to meet her and said, “He just returned from the psych eval. I don’t know what the results are as yet.”

“Would it be possible for us to interview him?”

“I think that can be arranged, he isn’t in solitary or segregated holding. Wait here a minute. I’ll arrange it.”

“Thanks, we owe you for this. How is it that a plainclothes cop is in charge of this investigation?”

With a smile, Boyce replied, “Hey, I owe you. I’m not a plainclothes cop anymore. I’ve been promoted to detective, thanks to you and your partner.” He started moving down a hall and said, “Come this way. His name is Dennis Day. He works for

the firm of Benny, Livingston and Van Jones. No previous arrests, not so much as a parking ticket.”

“Sure doesn’t sound like a hardened criminal, does he?” JJ commented.

Boyce replied, “Appearances can be deceiving, but I don’t think so in this case. I think I believe him.”

Boyce left them in a room with a table and some chairs. At one end was a large mirror that Hattie guessed was a one way glass so that interviews could be observed. While they waited, Hattie delved into her bag and came up with a mini-recorder, notepad and pencil.

After a few minutes, Day was brought in. JJ introduced himself. “Hi, I’m James Olsen Junior and this is my partner, Henrietta Kaplin. We work for the Daily Planet. Do you mind if we record the session?”

Day had a thoughtful expression for a few seconds and then said, “No, I don’t mind, record away. Kaplin and Olsen. I’ve read your stuff. You’re good. Why are you here?”

Hattie said, “We’d like to find out what happened last night. Did you really rob that jewelry store?”

He burst out, “NO! No ... well, I don’t really know.” He started shaking his head. “They showed me a tape and it sure looked like me and they say that they found my fingerprints, but I don’t remember anything about it.”

Hattie indicated the chairs and said, “Why don’t we get comfortable?”

After they were all seated, Hattie placed the recorder on the table and said, “Why don’t you tell us what you do know, what you \*do\* remember.”

He started getting agitated and almost shouted, “But I don’t remember anything. If I don’t remember anything, what can I tell you?”

JJ said in a soothing tone, “Dennis, we’re on your side. We want to solve this mystery and get you off the hook. Help us out here.”

He settled down somewhat and said, “Sorry, it’s just, I’ve been arrested for something I didn’t do and they seem to have everything they need to prove that I actually did it.”

Hattie said, “If you don’t remember the evening, let’s start in the afternoon. What were you doing in the afternoon?”

His countenance was one of concentration as he thought back. He was concentrating for almost half a minute before he spoke, obviously marshaling his thoughts. “It had just been announced that they were making me a partner in the firm. I was really happy; all of that hard work had finally paid off. I was on my way up the corporate ladder. The sky’s the limit. There was a meeting of the staff for the announcement of my promotion.”

“Everyone was congratulating me. Lots of hands patting me on the back. There were a couple that I was very happy didn’t hold a knife. It’s a cutthroat business. There were a couple of other junior partners that were also vying for the same position. I’m sure they weren’t happy with the decision.”

Hattie held up a hand to stop him and said, “Let’s look at that. Would it be possible that one of them was responsible for what happened?”

Shaking his head he said, “I don’t see how.”

“What are their names?”

“Well, there’s Don Blank and Phil Harris ... and oh, yes, Mel Wilson. Don’t forget Mel.”

“Do you suspect anyone in particular?”

“If I had to guess, I’d guess Mel. He did an impersonation of Mr. Benny, James Benny, our CEO, that had all of us rolling on the floor laughing. He doesn’t look that much like him, but over the phone, you can’t tell them apart. One time, he called the deli and ordered a catered lunch for the entire staff and impersonated Mr. Benny when he did. When the lunch was delivered, the delivery boy who had taken the order swore up and down that it was his voice on the phone. It really galled Mr. Benny to have to

shell out the cash for the meal. He’s a real penny pincher, that one.” He started laughing at the memory.

“We aren’t dealing with voice impersonations here. How much does he look like you?”

This had the effect of sobering him up. “Well, not a lot. He’s shorter than me and his hair is thinning.”

Hattie had been writing in her notebook. “Let’s move on. What happened after the announcement?”

“We all went back to work for the afternoon; time is money, you know, and then after work some of us went out for a couple of drinks. Now, I don’t normally drink, mind you, but this was a celebration, so I had a couple. At least I think I had a couple, it could have been just one. After that things get kinda hazy. I remember talking with Sadie. The next thing I remember is waking up in my bed. That was really odd. I was still dressed in the clothes I’d had on the previous day.”

“Have you ever suffered from blackouts before?”

“No, never.”

“Are you on any medications?”

“No, I’m as healthy as the proverbial horse.”

“Where did you all go for the drinks?”

“We went to ‘Stokes’. It used to be owned by Lenny Stokes, but it was taken over by a group after he was sent to prison. They still play a lot of loud music even though the founder isn’t around anymore.”

Hattie made a note of the name of the club.

“Is it possible that somebody put something in your drinks?”

“You mean like Roofies or something?”

Hattie chuckled and said, “Guys usually give Roofies to girls so that they can take advantage of them. You’re the wrong sex, but the idea still applies. Perhaps you were given something in your drink that made you ... I don’t know ... pass out. Oooh, no, that wouldn’t work. If you had passed out you couldn’t have pulled the stickup. It would have to be something that would, I don’t know, make you act like you were hypnotized or something. JJ, we need to ask your cousin, Sean. He’s a doctor. Maybe he would have some ideas on that.”

“It’s worth a try. Want me to give him a call?”

“Could you? That’d be great.”

JJ pulled out his cell phone and hit a speed dial number. After a few seconds the call was answered. “Sean, JJ, got a question for you. ... Do you know of any drugs that could make someone act like they had been hypnotized?” JJ pulled Hattie’s pad over and pulled out a pen to take notes. “Uh huh. ... Yes. ... Okay, thanks.” He wrote down a final word and closed his cell. “There is a whole class of compounds called,” he referred to his notes, “Benzodiazepines. There is also a drug called scopolamine. A long time ago, scopolamine was used as a truth serum. Now it’s used in low doses to prevent motion sickness, but in high doses it can do some nasty things, especially when combined with alcohol.”

“I wonder ... did they do a blood test?” she asked Day.

“No, they haven’t taken any blood samples.”

Hattie jumped up and pounded on the door. When Boyce answered she said, “Detective Boyce, we need to have a blood test performed on Mr. Day. Can you get that done?”

“Let me see.” With that he closed the door again. A few minutes later he reappeared with a paramedic. “I got lucky, Pete was here to transport a prisoner that had a heart attack to the prison hospital. He says he can do what you need while his partner preps for the transport.”

Hattie stepped in and said, “We need at least three vials of blood drawn. JJ’s cousin works at STAR Labs with Dr. Bernie Klein. We want them to analyze the blood for any drugs that may be in his system.”

Pete replied, “I don’t normally carry a supply of vacutainers around in my bag. I do have some syringes and some heparin. Heparin is an anticoagulant. If there will be any delay in running

your tests, I'll need to add that to the samples, so I think I can accommodate you. He opened his kit and pulled out what he needed and laid it out. He had Day sign a waiver and after putting a restricting band around Day's arm he examined the inner aspect of the elbow to find a vein, then he swabbed the area. He took a syringe and pulled up a small quantity of heparin from a vial and then inserted it into a vein and drew out a syringe full of blood. After capping the syringe he repeated the procedure until he had the required samples, which he marked and turned over to Hattie. He gave a copy of the waiver he had signed to Day and left.

Hattie said, "Okay, we need to go. We have to get these samples to STAR Labs. Don't worry, Mr. Day, we'll get to the bottom of this. Come on, JJ." She turned to Boyce and said, "Thanks, Boyce. We'll let you know what we find out. If we can solve this they might make you a sergeant."

Boyce smiled at the thought and waived to their retreating backs.

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JJ parked the car and they hurried into STAR Labs. As soon as they entered they spotted Jon. Hattie had called him and filled him in while JJ drove. She handed him the syringes of blood and followed him as he headed down the corridor to the lab.

When they entered the lab, Hattie spotted Dr. Klein and said, "Hi, Dr. Klein!"

"Well, if it isn't Ms ..."

"Kaplin," she provided.

"Right, Ms Kaplin. You were in Jon and Jen's wedding. So nice to see you again. Wait a minute, wasn't it you that found the nitroglycerine that was being used in those bombs about a year ago?"

"That was me, all right. How have you been?"

"Well, I've been busy helping this assistant of mine unlearn everything wrong he was taught in school. He'll make a fine researcher one day."

Jon was off to the side laughing at Dr. Klein's little joke.

Dr. Klein spotted the syringes in Jon's hand and asked, "What do we have here?"

Hattie said, "Dr. Klein, we need your help again. There was a robbery last night and the person that they say did it has no memory of the event or the entire night for that matter. I was wondering if you could check and see if there are any drugs in his bloodstream. We are looking for, I don't know, benzodiazepines or scopolamine or something like that. Can you find things like that?"

Bernie was intrigued. He started thinking aloud, "Hmmmmm, has to be non-destructive, qualitative, not necessarily quantitative. Have to separate them from other natural blood components. Most likely organic." He seemed to come to a decision. "Jon, take an aliquot of this sample and dilute with normal saline solution. We have some of it in that cabinet over there. We were using it in those rat studies. Then inject it into the HPLC under standard conditions. Run the effluent through the mass spec. I'm going to process some of this and run an FTIR. Once you finish with the HPLC, take the same sample and run UV Fluorescence and also run a UV spectra. Pull up those standard spectra from that drug study." He turned to Hattie, "Do you know the blood type?"

"No, I didn't ask."

"Jon, do a blood type analysis so that you get the right profile. Make sure you pull up the right type."

"Will do, Doc." Jon turned to his tasks.

Hattie asked, "How long will all of this take?"

Dr. Klein looked over at Jon and said, "I don't know, it all depends on how efficient my assistant is." He saw that Jon was moving at superspeed. He looked at Hattie and JJ and raised an eyebrow.

Seeing this, Hattie reassured him by saying, "We're all family." She hooked her arm through JJ's and said, "We're being

married in just a couple of months."

Bernie released a relieved sigh and said, "Okay, so you are in on the family secret. That's a relief." He had been concerned about Jon revealing what he could do.

In a relatively short time, short only because of Jon's superabilities, they had the answer, at least a partial answer. Jon provided Dr. Klein with the reports that he had generated. Dr. Klein moved to his lab bench and after donning a hot mitt, picked up a beaker containing a steaming brownish liquid that had been sitting on a stand over a low-burning Bunsen burner and took a sip. Seeing the shocked expression on his visitor's faces he held it out and asked, "Coffee?"

Seeing what it was in Hattie thought that there was a danger of ingesting something other than that which was being offered and said, "Uh, no thanks, Dr. Klein."

"Your loss, Jon makes a terrific beaker of coffee." He took another sip and paced it back on the burner. He took a few minutes to look over the reports.

Once he had finished his analysis he said, "Okay, when we compare his blood to a sample of, let's see, type O negative, from an earlier study I believe that I can see some traces of foreign substances. By running this sample against the previously run sample of the same type the common factors are identified and eliminated. It looks like most of it has metabolized and there isn't enough to get a clear analysis of the structure. It looks like a benzyl ring, some hydroxyls, could be a carbonyl, some amines or amides. Hard to tell, but there definitely is something there. It's a shame that the sample wasn't taken sooner, then we might have had a better chance at a complete structure. You mentioned benzodiazepines and there are structures that could indicate that something related to them is present."

"Thanks, Dr. Klein. Could you please write that up for me? If this happens to someone else, we can use your analysis to make sure they order a blood sample be drawn as soon as the individual is picked up next time." Turning to JJ she said, "Let's go, JJ, we have to get this written up. Maybe he'll be granted bail based on these findings. At least we can hope."

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#### Chapter 4 — A Stranger Proposal

Thursday, March 01, 2029

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That evening, JJ took Hattie to Travaglini's, their favorite restaurant. It was too cold to sit outside so they occupied a table in the rear. Since they were regulars, when JJ had called earlier to make the reservation he had been given a choice table.

After a delicious pasta dinner and half a bottle of Chianti each they were both feeling a little mellow.

Hattie somewhat shyly asked, "JJ, did you really like what you saw last night? I mean, it wasn't too much, too soon was it? I mean, the wedding isn't until June and here I am enticing you. I mean, I have to be trying your patience. I mean, I saw your reaction, boy, did I see your reaction. You \*were\* reacting to \*me\* ... weren't you?" Her nervousness caused her to repeat the same phrase over and over.

He had picked up on her nervousness, so to make her a little more comfortable, with a smile he replied, "You'd better believe I was reacting to you. I'd have to be dead not to react to you. You're gorgeous; you know that, don't you?"

Smiling self-consciously at this praise she started to blush. "You're just saying that."

"What? No, no I'm not. It's the honest truth. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever met. I can't believe that you have actually consented to marry me. I have to be the luckiest guy in the world."

Shyly, Hattie asked, "Do you really want to get lucky?"

Startled, he asked, "Huh? What do you mean?"

"I don't know about you, but I had a hard time sleeping last night."

He snickered and said, “You and me both. I finally got up and worked on kata until I decided on a cold shower.”

Hattie laughed, attracting the attention of those at the tables near them. Seeing this she quieted and finally said, “Me too.”

Now it was JJ’s turn to laugh. After calming himself he asked, “What are we going to do about this situation? I guess we could just give up on sleep until after the ceremony, but I don’t want to fall asleep on our wedding night.”

“Neither do I. I’ve been looking forward to it too much. I just don’t think I can continue to go on this way though. We need to do something.”

“What do you suggest?”

Hattie was silent for a long time which was trying JJ’s patience, but when she finally spoke, he was happy that he hadn’t let his impatience show. “Well, this morning I called our super. I asked if there were any two-bedroom apartments available. I figured we would be needing a bigger place once we are married and if there was one available we should go ahead and get it instead of waiting and maybe not finding anything.”

Trying to remain calm, JJ commented, “That was a good idea. What did he say?”

Hattie was relieved at JJ’s response and pressed on, “There is a two bedroom that will be available next weekend.”

JJ was now becoming eager. He could see where this conversation was headed and couldn’t be happier. “Wow, that soon? Which one?”

Hattie was pleased with how JJ was taking all of this, but now she was going to broach the most important question and her trepidation was returning. What if he didn’t want the same thing? “It’s apartment 501. What should we do?”

“I think we need to grab it while it’s available. Maybe he’ll accept the security deposit from your current apartment for it since you will be moving from one apartment to another in the same building.”

Her feeling of relief was almost palpable; he hadn’t outright rejected the idea. “I already did and he did.”

He was exuberant, but was careful not to appear too eager; still, he said, “That’s my girl! Wow, we already have a new apartment.”

Now came the critical point. “That still doesn’t solve our problem. In fact it could exacerbate it.”

JJ shook his head as he asked, “What problem?”

Hattie smiled as she replied, “Sleep deprivation.”

Having a very good idea what Hattie was suggesting, JJ decided to play dumb. “Well, I don’t know. Do you have a suggestion?”

Looking down at her empty plate with a red blush moving up her neck and into her cheeks, she shyly said, “Well, you could give up your apartment at the same time. Between the two of us we could afford the increased rental and actually save some money, but only if we both only had the one apartment to pay for.”

As she had been speaking, JJ’s mouth had gone suddenly dry. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing, but there it was, right out there in the open. She was asking him if he wanted to move in with her. He stuttered, “You mean ... you want me to ... but ... June ...”

“Yeah, I know. I think that if either of us is going to get any sleep between now and then, it is going to have to be ... together.”

He was beside himself he was so happy, but decided to still play it cool, but not too much. “You want me to move in with you? Wow, this is so sudden! I’ll have to think about it. ... That’s long enough, let’s start packing for the move.” JJ called for the check.

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Silence prevailed during the entire trip back to the apartment house. They were each wrapped up in their own thoughts.

Once they arrived at Hattie’s apartment they went inside and sat side by side on her couch. JJ put his arm around Hattie’s shoulder; she leaned into him and snuggled in, getting comfortable. She was sitting on his right, so she took her left hand and reaching across intertwined the fingers of her left hand in his right. They sat that way for a time, just enjoying the contact. Finally JJ broke the silence, “What made you decide to check on apartments?”

She looked up at the ceiling and said, “Having you up there, so close and yet so far away ... it was just too much. I just feel like I need you closer. That’s why you have to give up your apartment and move in. If you stayed in your apartment and I moved to 501 we’d be farther apart. That would defeat the purpose.”

“Do you still want to wait, for ... you know?”

Hattie was blushing at the thought as she replied, “I think I’d still like to. It \*is\* a two bedroom apartment and we could still say goodnight and go to our separate rooms, but you’d be a lot closer.”

“If that’s what you want. I’m a very patient person.”

“Really? You could have fooled me last night. You seemed rather anxious.”

“Well, as long as you don’t parade around the apartment, nearly in the nude, I’ll do my best.”

With a wicked little smile, Hattie said, “No promises.”

JJ pulled back and looked at her with a shocked expression.

Hattie pulled him back into close contact and said, “I’ll try not to push you beyond your limits ... but ....”

“But what?”

“I reserve my rights as a woman ... to change my mind.” She craned around and gave him a kiss.

He shifted her around and deepened the kiss.

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March 02, 2029

First thing the next morning, Hattie went into Lois and Clark’s office. Clark was blue penciling an article so Hattie addressed Lois, “I need to go down to HR and file a change of address.”

“Oh? Where you moving to, Hattie girl?”

“Well, the wedding will be soon and we will need a bigger place. I found a two bedroom apartment in the same building.”

Lois had a thoughtful look as she asked, “You know that you are living in my old building, don’t you?”

Smiling, Hattie replied, “Yeah, actually I knew that. I figured that you had chosen it for good reason and I was right. It isn’t too far from work and the rooms are pretty nice.”

“What apartment will you be moving to?” Lois asked.

“I called the super to inquire and he said that 501 would be opening up.”

Lois started to smile while Clark threw down his pencil and burst out in laughter.

Hattie was surprised at this reaction and looked back and forth between the two.

Clark calmed himself and looking at Lois asked, “Is history repeating itself, or what? Next thing you know they’ll be moving to 344 Clinton!” Clark lost his temporary control and started to laugh again.

Hattie looked at Lois, a question in her eyes.

Lois gave in to her mirth and chuckled briefly before she said, “501 is \*my\* old apartment,” and started laughing again.

Hattie was stunned. She hadn’t been aware of this fact.

Lois controlled herself again and said, “I hope it brings you better luck than it did me. Even with all of the locks I had on that door it had nearly as much traffic as Grand Central Station. While I was in the shower one day an assassin let himself in and set up a bomb with a pressure plate. I had to keep moving on the pressure pad. If I stopped it would blow up. If I jumped off it would blow up and it was keyed to a metronome that kept going faster and

faster. Just in the nick of time, Superman arrived and carried the bomb away. Then there was the time that the Mechanic jimmied my microwave to knock us out and then explode. Again, Superman arrived in the nick of time to save not only me, but my parents and Clark's folks. Dan Scardino let himself in the window one night. All I had was a kitchen spatula to defend myself. There was the time that Mr. Makeup came in disguised as the super. He was trying to kill me when Clark intervened. He was so sweet. Clark, I mean, not Mr. Makeup; he had been sitting up all night keeping a watch over me. Then, another time, Ching and Clark used my living room to train on the Drei so that Clark could fight Nor."

Hattie was speechless. Finally she managed to say, simply, "Wow," in a hushed tone.

Lois had a dreamy expression at the memory as she said, "Don't worry, it wasn't all bad. That living room was the first place that Superman took me air dancing," and she sighed at the memory. Smiling, she looked back at Clark. "That was a special night."

Clark smiled as he also remembered. He moved over and put his arms around Lois' waist as he said, "Yes, yes it was." As he was finishing his statement, he kissed the side of Lois' neck. As he did, Lois sighed and tilted her head aside to give him more room to continue. He was more than happy to oblige her.

After almost a minute he stopped; Lois finally opened her eyes and with a dreamy look, added, "I almost always left the back window in the living room unlocked," she looked over her shoulder at Clark again and finished, "just in case a certain superhero wanted to stop by."

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A little later Hattie had a call. "Daily Planet, Kaplin."

"Kaplin, this is Boyce. We've had another one."

Immediately, Hattie grabbed her notebook to take notes. "What do you have for me?"

"Young guy, no criminal record, robbed a liquor store.

Caught him on the security cam. He had been a customer and was recognized by the clerk. We picked him up this morning. Per your request we had blood drawn immediately. We already sent it over to STAR Labs for analysis. I guess you can contact them."

"Thanks, Boyce. We'll follow up on it. Did you find out how it happened?"

"Nah, just like the other one, he claims not to remember anything."

"As soon as we have the results from STAR Labs we will be in to do an interview."

"I'll make sure that he is kept in holding and not sent to the tombs."

"Thanks, we'll see you in a little while."

Hanging up she said to JJ, "We've got another one. Let's head over to STAR Labs. They could have the analysis complete by now."

After grabbing his jacket and putting it on, he grabbed her coat and held it for her. She smiled her thanks and picked up what she called her 'bag of tricks'. It was very reminiscent of Lois' bag, but in Hattie's case held various items such as lock picks, opera glasses, a strong little telescope, a telescoping wand or escrima and sundry other items. A few seconds later they were in the elevator headed down.

Upon arrival at STAR Labs they immediately went back to Dr. Klein's lab. After they entered and the occupants knew who it was, Jon resumed his tasks at superspeed.

Half an hour later Dr. Klein was correlating the findings. "The samples we got this time were a lot fresher. We were able to identify a number of familiar chemical structures. I checked the structure of the class of drugs called benzodiazepines and the individual structures we detect are all components of that class, however, there are some novel components such as lithium and an overabundance of oxygens. The oxygens could indicate an

alcohol form, but the lithium has me stumped."

Hattie asked, "Wasn't lithium used in treating schizophrenia?"

"Oh? Let me check." He pulled up a search and checked. "By Jove, you are correct. They have new treatments now, but lithium salts were used to treat bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia."

"What if this time the lithium is being used to create a schizophrenic episode?"

"I hadn't considered that, but I suppose it could be possible. Someone in a schizophrenic episode would not necessarily remember what they did after coming out of it. If it were combined with a drug in the benzodiazepines group it is conceivable that they could have a psychotic episode and be in a suggestible state as a result of the drugs administration. They could be told to do something and they would simply follow orders and then remember nothing after the fact when they come out of the psychosis."

Hattie was exuberant. "All right, we know how it is being done!"

JJ pointed out, "We still need to find the source."

"Right! Let's go interview this new victim. Thanks, Dr. Klein. Thanks, Jon. You guys are the best!"

A short time later JJ and Hattie arrived at the Twelfth Precinct. As soon as they walked in Boyce spotted them and called them over. "Same drill as yesterday. You can wait in the room and I'll bring him to you. If you don't mind, I'll be watching through the glass."

"We don't mind. We just need to get some background information from him. What's his name?"

"Andrews, Archibald Andrews. Here we are. I'll be back in a minute." He closed the door and left, only to return a minute later with the latest victim.

JJ started it. "Mr. Andrews, My name is James Olsen and this is my partner, Henrietta Kaplin. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Sure, go ahead, but please, call me Archie. Mr. Andrews is my father. I already told the police everything I know, which is nothing. Last night is a complete blank. It's really strange, this morning I woke up in my own bed and I was still dressed in the clothes I had on yesterday."

Hattie had pulled out her pad and recorder and started recording before he started to speak. She asked, "Did anything unusual or a special occasion occur yesterday?"

"Yeah, well, I got a promotion. I was assistant manager for a chain store. They just made me manager of another store that will be opening next week."

Hattie smiled; it was all starting to fit together. "Did you go out to celebrate, Archie?"

"Sure, you have any idea how often promotions like this occur? Not very often, I can assure you."

Hattie was closing in for the kill so she asked, "Where did you go?"

"Well, Jug, Betty, Veronica, and I went to 'Stokes'. We all like the music and the drinks are reasonable." When he said the name Veronica, he let out a sigh and got a wistful expression on his face. He obviously had a crush on her.

Hattie nodded her head. The last piece had fallen into place.

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## Chapter 5 — Undercover

March 02, 2029

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After interviewing Archie Andrews they headed back to the Planet. When they arrived a little later, Hattie and JJ gave Lois and Clark an update.

"So far we have two robberies, both carried out under unusual circumstances. In both cases the robber can't remember anything from the night before. Both victims were drugged and now we have a good idea with what. We would need to get a

sample to confirm it, though.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“In both cases the victims were upwardly mobile young guys. They had just been promoted and were celebrating with friends.”

“Okay, now you have a profile. How do you plan to capitalize on that?” Lois asked.

Hattie looked at JJ and said, “We might go undercover and see if they will try to drug JJ.”

“Whoa, that could be risky. Besides, how would you know where to go?” Clark asked.

“Oh, I forgot to mention, both victims went to ‘Stokes’ to celebrate,” Hattie replied.

Lois looked at Clark and a knowing look passed between them. “I haven’t even thought about that place since we put Lenny away. I wonder if it’s still being used for a hideout.”

“I could fly over and check it out.”

“Why don’t you do that and I’ll fill these two in on the history of ‘Stokes’ and Lenny Stokes.”

Clark headed for the stairwell, loosening his tie as he went.

Lois had Hattie’s and JJ’s attention as she summarized, “Lenny Stokes used ‘Stokes’ as a front while he built a device that used sonic waves to destroy buildings. He stole the technology from his old band partner who was a genius in the effects that sound waves could have. Anyhow, Lenny Stokes was blackmailing Metropolis, threatening to knock down the town hall if they didn’t pay a ransom. We went to confront him and he captured me. He had this glove ... it was full of electronics. It created a wall of sound around him that even Superman couldn’t penetrate, at least at first.” She started to smile at the memory, “That is until he had the idea to fly so fast that he broke the sound barrier and he was able to crash right through and rescue me. Keep in mind, this was back before we were married, or even dating for that matter, let alone before I knew who he was. All that to say, ‘Stokes’ has a history and that history may be continuing into this day.”

When Lois finished telling her story, Clark exited the stairwell, straightening his tie as he headed for the office.

“No, nothing. If they are using the club for this, they aren’t using that basement for anything other than storage.”

Hattie said, “That just means that the drug is being made somewhere else.” Turning to JJ she said, “Looks like we are going undercover, partner.”

Lois said, “Hold on there. How do you plan to handle it? It is doubtful if the other victims knew they were being drugged. Maybe you should call in the reserves. I wonder what Jon and Jen are doing. If they try to drug Jon it won’t have any effect and Jen has never been a drinker, but of course, neither of you are either. How are you going to do this?”

“I don’t know. Archie said that they went there because of the music. I wonder ... Maybe the band could use a new female backup singer.”

Lois smiled and thought to herself, <Just like me, again!> before she said, “If you even knew which band was playing and you knew someone in the band, perhaps; as it is, I don’t see that happening.”

Hattie looked at JJ and said, “Maybe they could use a new bartender.”

Lois thought again, <Just like Clark at the Metro Club.> before she said, “Again, there would have to be an opening.”

Hattie was getting frustrated. She was being thwarted at every turn. But frustration brought inspiration, so she suggested, “I think we will have to go with my original plan. JJ and I will go out to celebrate and hope they try to drug him and I can keep an eye on him.”

JJ looked at Hattie and said, “Gee, thanks! I’m gonna be the guinea pig, huh?”

Hattie looked at him and asked, “Do you have a better idea?”

“Yes, let’s just go there and observe. If we see someone

acting oddly, we follow them.”

The wind was taken out of Hattie’s sails with that one. Finally she said, “Yeah, I guess there’s that too. We could just go and see if anything happens.”

Lois smiled and said, “Sounds like a plan to me.”

After JJ and Hattie left, Lois said to Clark, “They balance each other out, same as us.”

Clark smiled at his still lovely wife and reflected on his good fortune. “Yeah, they do, don’t they?”

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5:00 PM, Friday, March 02, 2029

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To prepare for this assignment they discussed how they should dress and then they discussed the arrangements with Lois and Clark since they were more experienced at undercover work.

After Hattie and JJ left the office, Lois and Clark discussed how they would handle what was sure to happen and how to do it in such a way that they didn’t cramp Hattie and JJ’s play.

After shutting down for the day, they headed out to prepare. The decision they had reached was that JJ should look like someone in the business world and moving up while Hattie should look like arm candy. Accordingly JJ changed into a conservative suit while Hattie put on a scoop neck top, a royal blue skirt with a hem that reached just below mid-thigh and was slit up the left side to a point just below where her royal blue spandex shorts stopped and a pair of knee high boots. She didn’t know what would happen, but she wanted to be prepared. The short skirt with the slit would allow her freedom of movement and the spandex shorts would maintain her modesty.

Once they were attired they went out for dinner, after which they headed for ‘Stokes’.

Their timing was good and there was already quite a crowd when they arrived. People from all kinds of businesses crowded around in little groups and around the bandstand. The group that was playing was not one that Hattie was familiar with. It was probably a house band, so her idea of hiring on as a backup singer had been doomed from the start. Behind the bar were three bartenders, so there went the idea of JJ being hired in that capacity.

Keeping their eyes open for any strange behavior on the part of the patrons, they cruised the floor.

Unknown to them, as soon as they had entered they had been spotted on a security monitor and a call had been made to several men wearing communication devices similar to those used by the secret service, who began to converge on Hattie and JJ.

Another command was sent and the band started their next number. A majority of the customers were drifting in that direction when JJ suddenly realized that they were surrounded. He grabbed Hattie’s arm and squeezed it to get her attention.

Addressing the nearest tough, he said in a nervous voice, “Hi, nice night, isn’t it? Good song! Can I help you?”

The thug was reaching into his jacket as he replied, “Yeah, you and your girlfriend can come along with us, nice and quiet-like. We’re gonna take a little ride.”

Hattie pouted. “But we just got here! I haven’t even had my Shirley Temple yet.”

With that last word Hattie launched her attack. She started with a side snap kick to the crotch of the guy on her right. He immediately doubled over in pain. As she was recovering position from that move she continued her movement to the opposite side, spinning her body a quarter turn and using the same foot to front snap kick her assailant on her left in the chest. The air whooshed out of his lungs. That move flowed into a drop sweep that knocked the legs out from under the guy in front of her. When he fell he hit his head, knocking himself out.

While Hattie was performing her mayhem, JJ was dealing with three of his own. He also started on his right, delivering an elbow jab to the solar plexus. The thug’s air was forced from his

lungs and he was left gasping. The recovery from that move JJ turned into a palm strike to the chest of the guy on his left. That thug was left in the same condition as the other guy. He was about to deal with the attacker in front when that worthy swung a blackjack and caught him just over the right ear with a glancing blow which stunned him briefly, but long enough for him to be grabbed. JJ reacted instinctively as the thug grabbed him by stepping back away from the thug. JJ pulled the thug along using the thug's own momentum against him. As the thug followed, JJ grabbed the thug's shirt and spinning his body, pulled the thug across his right hip, throwing the thug to the floor. The thug skidded across the floor and his head hit the base of the bar with enough force to knock him out.

Hattie jumped up from her squat and did a split kick, sending a foot into the face of each of her two assailants that were still standing, knocking them both over. With all three of her assailants down she kept a wary eye on them as she called out, "JJ, you okay?"

She heard some grunts and the sound of blows and then puffing from the exertion, JJ said, "I'm fine, how about you?"

Hattie released a relieved sigh when she heard his voice and said, "I think we've worn out our welcome. We need to get out of here." She now looked around only to find that with all that had been happening, it had all been so quick and the band was playing so loud that most of the patrons didn't even know that anything was happening.

JJ shouted over the din, "What about your Shirley Temple?"

Hattie laughed. "Maybe another time."

"Whatever you say, sweetheart."

Stepping over their fallen foes, they headed for the door. Before they got there, however, they were intercepted by a man with a gun. "Going somewhere?"

Hattie and JJ both stopped. The way he was holding the gun demonstrated intimacy with the weapon and they were not close enough to deal with it. Waving the gun in a casual manner he inclined his head and said, "Over that way. We'll use the side exit."

Hattie tried to inch closer as she said, "But our car is out front."

He backed a pace and said, "Keep your distance. I said you're leaving by the side door. Now move!"

The thugs that they had dealt with had been recovering and a couple of them each grabbed JJ and Hattie, one on each arm, none too gently as a result of the rough handling they had just gotten from the couple, and led them out.

Outside they found themselves in an alley with a delivery van standing in it. One of the thugs moved over and opened the side door. A second thug, the one that had slugged JJ, reached into his jacket and pulled out an automatic. The first thug kept his gun on them as the second pulled out a black metal tube and screwed it onto the end of the barrel of his 9mm. While he was screwing it on he said, "This will net us a nice bonus. The bounty the boss has on you two will set us up in another town." Once the silencer was in place he negligently waved the gun around. "We load you into the van, take you out into the woods and dump you. They won't find the bodies for years, if ever."

JJ started to make a dive for the first thug, but the one with the silencer used it to club him over the head. He went down like a felled tree.

Hattie shouted, "JJ!" and dove onto him.

The one with the silencer laughed and asked, "Want to bet I can get both of them with one bullet?"

The others shouted their bets.

Silencer guy said, "Let's see." He leveled the gun and pulled the trigger. There was a soft plop, almost like a stifled cough.

The bullet never reached its intended target. A hand snatched it out of the air.

Seeing this, silencer guy shouted, "It's Ultra Woman! Get

her!" He and his associate both opened up on Ultra Woman. Her hands became a blur as she snatched bullet after bullet from the air.

As suddenly as the fusillade had started, it stopped when both of the gun wielders dropped their weapons because they were hanging in the air, suspended by their jacket collars, which were in the hands of Superman.

As the rest of the thugs tried to run, Kam-El knocked each one out. As soon as they were all unconscious he removed their belts and used them to secure their legs and used their shoelaces to secure their wrists.

Ultra Woman knelt and assisted Hattie to stand. She said, "Ms. Kaplin, how are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks, Ultra Woman. They were going to kill us."

"I know. We overheard."

"You overheard? Why didn't you come in sooner?"

"Terroristic threats and kidnapping don't carry the sentence that kidnapping and attempted murder does. We had to wait for the first shot to be fired."

Hattie was irritated. "And in the meantime, poor JJ got hit on the head!"

JJ was just starting to sit up at this point. He said, "It's all right, Hattie. I'll live."

"I need to take him home." She said it in an irritated tone.

Superman said, "That's okay. We can handle it from here. You will need to make a statement, but you can probably do that tomorrow. I'm sure the MPD will understand."

Hattie assisted JJ to stand and then with him leaning on her somewhat they headed for his car.

Once in the car, she challenged, "What did you think you were doing, going for that gunman that way?"

"I was hoping to distract them so that you could, I don't know, get away or something."

"James Olsen, Junior, don't you \*ever\* do anything like that again. They almost \*killed\* you."

Looking at her JJ could see the tears running down her face. He realized that she had really feared for his life and the thought that she could have lost him had really upset her. He said in a subdued tone, "I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

Her reply was succinct. "You'd better not or I'll kill you myself."

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## Chapter 6 — Aftermath

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When they arrived at Hattie's apartment a few minutes later, as soon as the door was closed behind them, Hattie threw off her coat, jumped into JJ's arms and started a kiss that he deepened. They staggered, together with Hattie going backwards, dragging JJ toward the couch. It caught her behind the knees and she fell back onto it with JJ on top. All during this action their lips never broke contact.

Hattie struggled with his jacket, trying to remove it. She broke the kiss long enough to gasp out, "Coat!"

He released her long enough to remove the coat and then came back down on top of her, resuming the kiss.

Her hands were at the back of his head, twined in his hair, pulling him into the kiss.

Suddenly, as if she had just made a decision, her hands left his head and started yanking at his tie. Once she had thrown that aside she started working the buttons on his shirt. She got one open and then a second, but was frustrated with how long it was taking. Suddenly buttons flying, she ripped the shirt open. Once it was open her hands were on his chest. That satisfied her for only a few seconds and then she reached down and started pulling the hem of her top out of her waistband. Once it was free she grabbed JJ's hands and guided them under the shell to her bra-encased breasts.

Realizing where his hands were he broke the kiss and asked,

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

In answer she attacked his mouth again; her hands caused his to close on her breasts and she released a protracted sigh of pleasure into the kiss.

Releasing her left breast, JJ moved his hand behind her back and released the hooks of her bra. When his hand came back around, it was under the material and he could feel the velvety soft flesh and the hard little nub pushing into his palm.

Suddenly she renewed the assault on his lips with the fervor of unbridled passion.

JJ pulled away and gasped, “Are you sure you want to do this? I thought you wanted to wait.”

With an air almost of desperation she said, “Waiting is overrated. It’s only a matter of time. Why waste it?” As she was saying this she was fighting with his belt. Then she said, “Come on, we’ll be more comfortable on the bed.”

They got up and moved to the bedroom, shedding clothes as they did.

Once in the bedroom, Hattie pulled the coverlet down and turned to look at JJ. She was impressed. She had seen him with just his gi pants on before which showed off his chest, but now there was nothing obstructing her view. His well-defined pecs and six-pack abs. The musculature of his arms and legs. She closed the distance between them. In a throaty, sensual tone she said, “Come to me. Please, come to me.”

He lifted her and gently placed her on the bed. Even in the dim light he could see how beautiful she was.

He hesitated and as he did, he asked, “Are you really sure you want to do this?”

Her answer assured him of her firm decision and they started a period of delicious awe-inspiring intimacy.

After a time she said, “It’s only ten o’clock and I will give you just two hours before you have to stop. We do have to get some sleep before work tomorrow. Oh, wait; forget that, we’re off tomorrow. We can forget sleep.”

Smiling, he said, “I’ll see if I can accommodate you.” They started another intimate episode.

In a dreamy tone she said, “I never dreamed it would be this good. This is better than the other night.”

“The other night?”

“Yeah, I dreamt about our wedding night, but it was nothing like this. This is sooo much better.”

JJ levered himself up, kissed her and staring into her face said, “Maybe it really isn’t normally. Our senses could all be enhanced because we were nearly killed just a short time ago.”

“Well, maybe that is true, but anyway, I think I need a nap after all of this.”

JJ started to get up and she stopped him. “Just where do you think you’re going?”

“You want to sleep.”

“Not without you here next to me I don’t!” She pulled him back down and pulled his hand over and firmly placed it on her breast. “Now I’ll be able to sleep for a while.” JJ settled in and with occasional squeezes of her breast watched as she composed herself for repose.

He must have dropped off as well, because the bedside clock read 11:30 when she awakened him. There followed another period of intimacy which was every bit as good as the first time.

She collapsed onto his chest and lay there breathing very heavily and eventually she said, “No, it wasn’t the fact that we were almost killed. That was every bit as good. Mmmmmmm, I think I’ll take another nap.” She closed her eyes and her even breathing told him that she was already asleep.

After another short rest they had yet another period of intimacy after which she lay next to him with her head on his shoulder for a pillow and her arm across his chest.

He played with her hair as she fell asleep again.

The next time they awoke the clock read 7:30.

It was Saturday and they had the weekend off. They called for takeout and didn’t leave the apartment at all until Monday morning.

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The Saturday edition of the Planet had the following story:  
\*\*“STOKES CLOSED, STAFF ARRESTED,  
MANAGEMENT UNDER INVESTIGATION”\*\*

Daily Planet staff writer.

“A number of staffers at ‘Stokes’ have been arrested on varying charges ranging from assault to assault with a deadly weapon and attempted murder.

The intervention of the superheroes, Ultra Woman, Superman and Kam-El, prevented two members of the Daily Planet team from being murdered while doing an investigation.

The reason for the assault has yet to be determined; however, it is thought to be related to the investigation being pursued by the Daily Planet staff. Story continues on A2”

The paper was spread out under a light on top of a desk. A female voice challenged, “Now what are you going to do? Those losers that you had working for you failed just like all of the rest. When are you going to learn? You can’t brainwash anyone and then be able to depend on them.”

In a petulant tone the individual in the dark replied, “But I was assured it was foolproof. They are supposed to follow orders implicitly! Not only has this set our timeline off, it has lost me some key operatives and a testing venue.”

“How many more tests were you going to run?”

“They were testing the beta sample. They just completed the gamma formulation. It was supposed to be longer-acting. The next step in my goal of being able to brainwash world leaders into doing my will and this time, I won’t need a computer to do it.”

The female voice held a hurt tone. “And just what is the problem with computers?”

“Oh, nothing really, it’s just that I’ve spent more than enough time in computers.”

“And whose fault was that? It wasn’t mine.”

Defensively he said, “I know, I did it to myself, but you helped!” He flipped up a split keyboard and scooted out from under on four wheels and started rolling back and forth as one would pace. “I need a new venue. We have to test the gamma formulation. Delta should achieve the results I am after, but we need to know how much more effective gamma is over beta before we can move ahead. Once it has been tested then we can move on to world domination.”

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\*Monday March 5, 2029\*

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When Hattie and JJ walked into the newsroom Monday morning there was a change in their relationship and Lois spotted the difference right away. In a low tone she said, “Clark, I think something has happened.”

Clark had always been somewhat obtuse in matters of relationships and he asked, “Oh, what?”

“Hattie and JJ.”

“What about them?”

“I think they changed their minds about waiting.”

Clark looked at Lois with a mystified expression. “Oh? How can you tell?”

“Just by looking at them.” Lois snickered “Also, Hattie is walking a little stiffly. I think she has been using muscles she isn’t used to using and taking unaccustomed positions.”

“I wonder why they changed their minds.”

“Don’t you think that almost being killed again might have had something to do with it?”

“Well, don’t embarrass her by saying anything.”

“What? Me? Do you really think I’d do something like that?”

“I wouldn’t put it past you.”

Lois snickered in reply.

Hattie and JJ made their way to the office.

Lois asked, “Soooooo, what did you guys do after you left Friday night? Huh? Anything ... interesting? Watch a movie? Explore the pleasures of the bedroom?”

Hattie’s jaw dropped and the flush moved rapidly up her neck and into her cheeks while JJ tried to hide a nervous smile.

Clark said sharply, “Lo-is! I said not to embarrass them. You’re getting as bad as my mom. Actually, I don’t think even she would go that far.”

Lois said, “Oh, come on. You didn’t act this way when Jon and Jen moved in together and we both know they didn’t sleep in separate bedrooms even though it was a two-bedroom apartment. Look, they’re getting married in just a couple of months. So what if they jumped the gun a little. After what nearly happened Friday night, who can blame them?”

Hattie, trying to change the subject, said, “Yeah, about Friday night. What did you do with those characters?”

Clark said, “Ultra Woman went to report the incident while Superman and Kam-El made sure they stayed put until the paddy wagon arrived to cart them away.”

Lois said, “If you haven’t done so already, the two of you need to go in and give your statements.”

Clark added, “Superman, Ultra Woman and Kam-El all gave statements Friday night. They are being charged with attempted murder.” He laughed. “The bullets and shell casings were enough to prove that. The one is also being charged with felony possession of an illegal weapon. That silencer, he didn’t have a license for it.”

“They mentioned that there was a bounty on our heads.”

“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me. At various times something like that has happened to Superman. You’ve made a powerful enemy. You may have to keep a low profile for a while.”

“It’s not in my nature.”

Clark said, “See what I mean?”

Mystified at his statement, Hattie asked, “What?”

Lois answered, “He just means that I would have said the same thing. Look, Hattie girl, it’ll be best if you just keep a low profile for a while. Work from the office. No undercover. Obviously, they know what you look like.”

“That just means that we have to use disguises.”

Clark said, “Look, Hattie, Superman, Ultra Woman and Kam-El can’t be everywhere at once.”

“We know that. We also know that we have to be able to do our jobs and we have to be out and about to do that. What kind of reporter would I be if I stayed in the office all of the time?”

“Okay, you win; just try to be careful, will you?”

“We’ll try. Oh, JJ and I discussed it and ... we’ve decided to move up the wedding. I’m glad we didn’t schedule the church already.”

Lois asked, “Okay, how soon?”

“Just long enough for me to get my gown and you and the girls to get dresses. How does, three weeks sound?”

“How about we make it four weeks? March 31<sup>st</sup>. That should ensure that everything can be ready.”

Hattie looked at JJ and he nodded. She said, “Okay, March 31<sup>st</sup> it is.”

Lois said, “Now that that’s settled, what other angles do you have to go at this story?”

“I need to call MPD and see if there have been any more robberies. I would guess that they could be laying low. Obviously, they know we are on to them. We really blew it by going there Friday.”

Lois said, by way of encouragement, “There’s always another angle. You just have to think of one.”

“Let’s go, JJ. Let’s see what we can come up with for a new

angle.”

Back at Hattie’s desk JJ sat in her guest chair and asked, “What do you want to do?”

With a sly smile she replied, “You already know what I want to do, but we are here and not in the bedroom.”

He hissed, “SShhhhhhhhhh. Remember who’s in the office? Superhearing.”

Hattie blushed as she looked back over her shoulder and saw Lois looking at her, a broad smile on her face and Clark laughing quietly. She muttered to herself, “I’ll probably never get used to that.”

Changing the subject, JJ said, “They have to be getting the drug from somewhere. If we could find out who discovered it and where it’s being made, maybe we could cut off the supply.”

Hattie jumped on that suggestion. “Yes, that’s it. You know, this all started with MetroServe, Metro-Staff and MiraLabs. Three businesses that were formerly parts of the Luthor Empire. I wonder if someone at MiraLabs formulated the drug.”

“They have a drug division, so it would be easy for them to hide the research and manufacture. I wonder if there are any components that could be traced to them specifically.”

“We need to start checking invoices and bills of lading. I’ll call Dr. Klein and see if there’s anything special we can look for. Why don’t you start checking and see if you can find out who this mysterious person is that is buying up the stock. There has to be a public record somewhere. Also, see if there’s any research being done on the benzodiazepines drugs. There might be something in the trade publications. Peer reviews of the research, test results and such.”

“Maybe I can get my dad to help on that. He taught me a lot about computers, but he’s the best. I’ll see if he’s available. If he isn’t on an assignment, he might be able to help. I think Aunt Lois and Uncle Clark will be satisfied. This will keep us in the office for a while.”

“Yeah, but for a change, I’m looking forward to quitting time.”

“At lunchtime do you want to start looking for your gown?”

“Yeah, but I’m going to ask Aunt Lois to accompany me. I like the sound of that ... Aunt Lois. It won’t be that long until she’s my aunt. I’ll really be a part of the family. I’m gonna go ask her.”

Hattie got up and moved to the office. “I’d like to go looking for a gown at lunchtime. Are you free?”

“Don’t you think your mom ought to be involved?”

“Ohmygosh! What was I thinking? Yeah, you’re right. I need to give her a call. I’ll get back to you.” She hastily exited and returned to her desk. Picking up the phone, she dialed her mom. “Hi, Mom. It’s your wayward daughter. ... I’m doing fine. Look, the reason I called, well, actually there are a couple. We are moving up the wedding. ... March 31<sup>st</sup>. ... Yeah, the end of this month and that’s the other reason I called, I need to gown shop. Are you free at lunchtime today? ... Good! Can you come by here? Aunt Lois will be going with us. ... Yeah, I’m starting to call her that so that I get into the habit. ... Okay, see you at noon! Love ya, bye.” She released a relieved sigh and hung up.

She went back to the office and said, “All set. She’ll be here at noon and we can go shopping.”

Lois looked over at Clark and asked, “Does the Editor have any problem with some of the staff taking a long lunch?”

Clark laughed and looking at Hattie, said, “I’m only the editor when she wants something. Sure, go ahead and have a good time. Maybe you should actually have lunch with Mel before you shop. I’m sure she’d enjoy the time with both of you. After all, you see Hattie every day, but Mel doesn’t see her that often nowadays.”

Lois turned to Hattie and said, “That sounds like a good idea to me, how about you?”

“Lunch with my two favorite women? How could I turn that

down?”

“It’s a date, now, get out of here and get some work done. I like your idea of looking into MiraLabs.” Lois reached up and touched her ear.

Hattie smiled and said, “It is another angle to pursue.”

“And a safer one.”

Hattie smiled and exited.

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Things were quiet for a time. There were no more mysterious robberies. The evidence provided by STAR Labs was used by the lawyers when the cases went before the Grand Jury and the decision arrived at was against indictment.

The nicest thing was that there were no more overt attempts on the lives of JJ or Hattie.

A search of the trade publications provided them with a lead. There was a researcher, Dr. Clarence James, now an employee of MiraLabs, that had worked with benzodiazepines in previous years. He had been hired based upon the articles that had been published.

There was also a Dr. Frank Simmons who was a researcher in psychoactive drugs, specifically those used in the treatment of bipolar disorder. His article on the use of lithium in the treatment of schizoaffective disorder gave them a lead as well. He also was employed by MiraLabs subsequent to the publishing of his article.

A search of the background of Doctors James and Simmons showed that both had problems, both were gamblers. Dr. Simmons had taken a second mortgage on his home to pay off gambling debts.

Recently, however, both had received massive influxes of cash from unnamed sources. They had both claimed that they were salary bonus checks; however, they were the only individuals to receive such bonuses.

Red flags were waving all over the place when Hattie and JJ found this information.

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Saturday, March 10, 2029

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Moving day had arrived. Jon and Jen, Lois and Clark all showed up to help move the couple to their new apartment.

Hattie and JJ had been living in Hattie’s apartment, but he had only moved enough of his clothes down to get by, so items had to be moved from both apartments.

Hattie and JJ had taken Friday off to begin packing up.

Lois and Hattie led the way with the first load. Hattie opened the door, stepped back and said to Lois, “Why don’t you go first?”

Lois smiled and stepped forward. As soon as she crossed the threshold she said, “Hello, apartment,” and chuckled. “It’s been a long time. Be good to our girl.”

Hattie smiled as she heard this. She entered and said, “That box goes into the bedroom.”

Lois nodded and headed in that direction.

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## Chapter 7 — A Little B&E

Friday, March 16, 2029

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After discovering the information on James and Simmons, Hattie and JJ had researched the plans for MiraLabs by pulling the architectural drawings of LexLabs. They found out where James and Simmons each had their labs. Fortunately they did not have separate offices. Theirs and each of their technicians’ desks were located within the lab itself, which would simplify matters considerably.

By checking the sub-surface maps, they found an old subway spur line, not much more than a tunnel. It was a part of the old, unfinished subway that Luthor had been funding.

Clark came into the conference room when he overheard

what Hattie and JJ were talking about. “Luthor never did anything that wouldn’t benefit him in some way. There has to be a reason for that tunnel. It is possible that it was going to be used for either an escape route or else as a means of moving contraband, in or out. There is most probably a hidden access into the basement of MiraLabs that has been forgotten about. What are the two of you thinking about doing?”

Hattie replied, “Well, we need to get in and search a couple of the labs to see if we can find evidence of the manufacture of the drug.”

Hearing what they were talking about, Lois abandoned her desk and joined them in the conference room. Looking over the plans, she said, “Sweet! We could get in easily and avoid the guards and security systems.” She pointed to a section of the basement and said, “Electrical room. If we short out the panels the entire place will be without power and we won’t have to worry about the security cameras or electronic locks.”

Hattie asked, “Why not the locks?”

“Fail safe. In the event of a power outage they all release so that the occupants aren’t trapped. It’s a disaster emergency policy.”

“Oh, that’s a good thing to know.”

Lois asked, “When do we go?”

Hattie looked at her in surprise. “We?”

Lois smiled and said, “Sure. I haven’t done any B&E for a long time. I want to make sure I’m not getting rusty.”

Hattie smiled, Lois was going with them! She looked at Clark. He was shaking his head as he said, “You are incorrigible, you know that?”

“Come on, Clark! It’ll be fun. Besides, it’ll give us a chance to watch over the two of them.”

He was weakening and Hattie could see it. He asked, “What if we get caught?”

“With what we can do? Who could ever catch us? Come on, Clark, loosen up!”

Shaking his head, he said, “All right. It has been a while. It’ll make a nice change of pace and if we can find the evidence we need we can put this gang out of business.”

Hattie was smiling broadly as she said, “Great! Shall we do this tomorrow night? There shouldn’t be any staff to avoid, just the guards.”

Lois was also smiling as she said, “Sounds like a plan. Come on over to our place for dinner and we’ll leave from there.”

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Saturday, March 17, 2029

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When they arrived at the Wisteria Lane home, Hattie was wearing her black cat suit with the equipment belt. In one pouch was her lock pick set. She had two telescoping batons, one on each hip. A forehead flashlight as well as a regular flashlight were in another pouch.

JJ had on a tight-fitting coverall. He also carried a flashlight. On a utility belt he carried a mini-scanner in a pouch. The scanner plugged into a smartphone and was wide enough to feed full sheets of paper into. The images would be stored on the phone until downloaded or e-mailed to an account. Their smartphones also had integral high-resolution cameras. He also carried a hand scanner, in case they had to copy pages from a research notebook.

Lois and Clark were both dressed in black as befitted their purpose. They all headed out in one car. When they arrived at their entry point they all dropped down through a manhole into a culvert. This led to the tunnel they were after. After traveling down this for a distance with Lois leading the way they found the access into MiraLabs. Passing through the hidden door, they entered the sub-basement of MiraLabs. After ascending a flight of stairs, Hattie found the electrical room. Clark opened the main switch panel and used his heat vision to melt all of the breakers in

the box. When the breakers failed, emergency lighting throughout the structure turned on.

Quickly, they ascended another flight of stairs and took refuge in a room because they could hear feet rapidly approaching. Once the guards had passed, they quickly moved up a stairwell to the third floor, where they had determined James' and Simmons' labs were located. They found them without any difficulty. Before they were able to start their search, however, they heard guards approaching. They could hear their shouts and doors banging as they attempted to force them closed.

Clark grabbed JJ and Lois grabbed Hattie and they floated up to the ceiling close to the door. When the guard looked in, all he saw was an empty room.

Once the guard had left they proceeded with the search.

Hattie used her lock picks on a file cabinet while Lois opened a locked desk drawer where they found a research notebook.

JJ started thumbing through it looking for some familiar words. Dr. Klein had been kind enough to provide a list of terms to look for. It wasn't too long until he said, "Bingo," in a hushed tone and started scanning pages.

While he was doing this Clark continued to look through the files.

Lois and Hattie had gone to search the other lab. They found evidence of cooperation between the two scientists in references to each other's work.

The final piece fell into place when Lois found a clinical trial report that referenced DD as a subject and there was another reference to AA as another subject. Apparently the 'Programming' of the two subjects prior to the robberies had been done by the scientists.

The icing on the cake was a container of gelatin capsules labeled "Zombie version beta". Hattie placed six capsules in another container, labeled it and put it into a pouch to give to Dr. Klein.

She said to Lois, "This is the mother lode. I think we have all that we came for. Let's collect JJ and Uncle Clark and split."

Lois sent, "Clark, let's wrap it up and get out of here. We have all that we came for."

In the other lab, Clark said to JJ, "Lois and Hattie are finished. Let's put everything back and get out of here."

JJ nodded, finished scanning the final report and started putting things away.

Just then they heard the guards returning. Seeing books and papers scattered around and knowing that if the guards looked in they would know that something was up, Clark sent, "We are going to need a distraction. We can't possibly clean up before the guards look in."

Looking down the hall and seeing a six-gallon bottle of water on a water cooler, Lois used her heat vision to poke two very small holes in the top. As soon as she did, water started to run out of the bottle, overflowing the reservoir and onto the floor. Hearing the guards approach she flew up over the water and used her superbreath to first spread the water over a large section of the hallway and then freeze it into ice. When she finished the hallway was a slick as an ice hockey rink. She quickly flew back and rejoined Hattie. She sent a message to Clark, "I think you will have the time you need." At the end there was a mental snicker.

Picking up on that, Clark sent, his worry coming through the link, "What did you do?"

Lois smiled as she replied, "It's pretty cold outside. With the power off it's starting to get cold in here. I thought I'd give them a chance to play some winter sports. Are you packed up yet? Watch the fun."

"Just about finished."

"That's good because here come the guards."

Thanks to the poor lighting provided by the emergency lights, the ice was invisible on the floor. Lois picked up a souvenir

paperweight that was sitting on a desk and threw it out the door and down the hall, aiming at a fire extinguisher hanging from a bracket on the wall. There was a metallic clang as it struck.

The shouts of the guards were clearly heard by all four of the trespassers as they started in pursuit of what they thought could be an intruder. Their shouts of, "Stop right there," and "Hold it!" Suddenly changed to cries of dismay as they hit the ice and their feet went out from under them and they fell heavily to the floor. Their attempts to stand only got them more contusions from bumping into each other and from additional falls. It was a ludicrous situation and Lois and Hattie both were hard put to stifle their laughter.

While this had been going on, Clark had been putting books and papers back at superspeed. He sent, "Finished here. Let's play shepherd and get our little flock out of here. I'll carry JJ. You carry Hattie and we will superspeed back to the basement. If there's no one there, I'll replace the breakers I fried and we can exit."

"Gotcha, we're on our way."

The guards were hanging on to each other and barely managing to keep their feet when the breeze created by the passage of the superheroes and their companions passing at superspeed knocked them down again. They thought that they heard brief laughter, but were unable to identify its source and decided that it must have actually been something else entirely.

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Monday, March 19, 2029

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Hattie and JJ went straight to STAR Labs in the morning. Jon met them in the lobby and took them back to the lab.

"Well, Ms. Kaplin! Do you have something else for us to look at?"

"I think so, Dr. Klein." She pulled out the vial and extracted a capsule, and holding it up, asked, "Could you analyze this and tell us what it is?"

Dr. Klein looked at it and said, "Well, off hand, I'd say it is a gelatin capsule. Fairly common. Used by a lot of pharmaceutical companies."

Hattie was shocked at this apparent unconcern. "No, Dr. Klein! Not the capsule, what's in it!"

Bernie started to chuckle. "Just my small attempt at humor. Sure, we'll look at it and see what we can come up with. Jon, standard protocol. See what it will dissolve in. Make a solution with a measured quantity. Add an external reference that we can calibrate against. There will probably be diluents included, Barden Clay, talc, sugar, something like that. The clay and the talc won't dissolve while the sugar will. Make notes of your observations."

"You got it, Doc." Jon went to work.

After two hours of intensive effort the reports were correlated. After Dr. Klein reviewed what he had, he directed Jon, "Send the data to Cray. Let's see what he can come up with. Let's see if he can give us a structure."

Hattie asked, "Who's Cray? Is he some brainy guy that you work with?"

"We keep Cray down in the deepest, darkest, coldest dungeon we have and make him work on projects like this."

Shocked, Hattie blurted out, "He's a prisoner? Slave labor?"

Jon was standing in the background, laughing and shaking his head at Dr. Klein's joke.

Hattie looked at Jon questioningly, seeing his reaction to her question.

Dr. Klein was also laughing at her reaction to his joke. He clarified, "Cray is actually a Cray25B supercomputer. It has a liquid nitrogen cooling system and it is very big and takes a lot of space even though its components are very small. It isn't the latest version, but it is only two years old."

Jon checked the data transfer progress and said, "Upload

complete, Doc.”

“Thanks, Jon.” He motioned for Hattie and JJ to follow him. He led them over to an oversized monitor, handed them each a pair of what looked like sunglasses and turning on the monitor, said, “These are polarized glasses. The offset is 90 degrees. They should render the picture in 3-D. Let’s watch as Cray builds the molecule for us.”

While they watched, different colored balls appeared on the screen and started to move together. Bars of light started connecting them, some single, some double and some triple. Dr. Klein used a laser pointer to indicate the balls as he narrated, “The red are carbon atoms, the yellow are oxygen, blue are hydrogen, green are nitrogen. Oh, what is that?” He typed a command and in a second he had a label attached to an orange ball. “Lithium!”

For several minutes the display shifted and rearranged itself, the computer adjusting the display as more data was fed in. After about five minutes the display firmed up and across the bottom of the screen a line of text appeared. “Statistical probability 97% within three standard deviational units.”

Dr. Klein let out a sigh of satisfaction as he said, “There it is. That’s what has been causing this. You were right about the lithium. See all of those double bonds on the oxygens? That is an alcohol-like structure. The basic structure is a lot like the benzodiazepines, but enhanced. It would have an effect similar to several shots of alcohol to start with, then the victim would become suggestible as the psychotic episode kicked in. As we saw, it metabolizes fairly rapidly and when the concentration in the blood falls below a certain level, the victim comes out of it with apparently no side effects other than not remembering the period they were under the influence.” He hit a key and an attached printer started to spit out a sheet of paper with the structure on it.

Hattie felt in her pocket and felt the vial with the extra capsules in it and smiled. She asked, “During the initial phases, could the drug act like a truth serum?”

“Hmmmmm, this structure here is basically the benzodiazepines structure. This section is more like scopolamine. They are joined by an oxygen bridge and each side has a lithium atom replacing a hydrogen atom in several key locations. I’d say that it could.”

“Thanks, Dr. Klein. That’s very helpful. Let’s go, JJ. We need to take this to the MPD. Maybe with this and the articles we found they can get a search warrant. They might even be able to bring in James and Simmons for questioning. If they do, I want to be there. Maybe I can make them a cup of coffee.”

“Coffee? Why?” JJ was mystified at this sudden change in her behavior.

“Just being nice.”

JJ saw her smile and was apprehensive.

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Sometimes the wheels of the judiciary, like bureaucracy, can grind slowly, but in this case, based on the evidence presented by Hattie and JJ coupled with the testimony already obtained and presented to the Grand Jury and judge, the judge hastened to sign the search warrant and the order for detaining James and Simmons for questioning

Files and research notebooks were all impounded and the assistants as well as the researchers were brought in for questioning.

After several hours the assistants were released. It had become obvious that they were simply following directions prepared by the researchers as they set up equipment and added reagents.

James and Simmons were each being questioned in separate rooms. Boyce was handling the investigation and was moving from room to room, but both researchers were stonewalling him. Their answers were evasive at best.

Boyce was taking a break when Hattie and JJ approached. Hattie asked, “How’s it going?”

With a disgusted air, Boyce replied, “It isn’t. The only good thing is that they haven’t lawyered up yet. At least this way I am free to question them.”

“Could we have a few minutes to talk with them?”

“Only if I can observe through the glass.”

Hattie smiled and said, “That’s fine by me.” She appeared to think about it for a second before she said, “Maybe I’ll fix Dr. James a cup of coffee. You know, break the ice. Put him off guard.”

Boyce said, “It might be worth a try. The coffee maker is in that room over there.”

Once in the room, out of sight, Hattie poured a cup of coffee and then extracting one of the pills from the vial, she dropped it in. She stirred it to make sure it was dissolved before exiting and moving to the interview room.

Boyce entered the observation room as she and JJ entered.

Hattie asked, “Dr. James, would you like a cup of coffee?”

He said, “Sure. Cream and sugar.”

“JJ, would you get the creamer and sugar for Dr. James?”

“Be right back.”

Less than a minute later he was back and Dr. James was preparing his coffee. As he started to drink, Hattie said, “My name is Henrietta Kaplin and this is my partner, James Olsen, Junior. We work for the Daily Planet.”

“I’ve read your articles. You’re good. Almost as good as Lane and Kent.”

Hattie smiled and said, “Thank you for that compliment. Lois Lane has been my hero for years. We’re incredibly lucky to be working for them. Dr. James, we have read your treatise on benzodiazepines and their use in treating bipolar disorder. It was groundbreaking.”

He was surprised. “You read that article?”

“Of course we did. We are very interested in the subject. You have been adding new, novel variants of the basic structure to form new compounds, each with unique properties. The inclusion of lithium in the molecule was brilliant.”

He was startled. “How did you know about that? It wasn’t in the article.”

“It was a logical extrapolation. Since lithium salts had been used previously in the treatment of bipolar disorder.” As Hattie was speaking she noticed that his eyes were starting to glaze over. He shook himself as if he was struggling to stay awake and a look of strong apprehension overtook his features.

Suddenly convinced that something was wrong, he asked, “What did you put in that coffee?”

Hattie smiled and said, “Well, to paraphrase an old saying, I’ve given you a taste of your own medicine. A little something I think you called ‘Zombie’.”

He started to rise from the chair and then his strength failed him and he fell back.

Hattie asked, “Dr. James, can you hear me?”

In a rather flat monotone he replied, “Yes.”

Hattie pulled out her recorder and turned it on before she continued, “Are you the inventor of Zombie?”

“Yes.”

Hattie waited for him to elaborate, but he didn’t. She realized that she would have to couch her questions in such a way as to elicit the desired responses. She asked, “Who was involved in the creation of the Zombie formula?”

“Myself and Dr. Simmons.”

“Who funded the project?”

“It was funded through MiraLabs.”

“Who is behind MiraLabs?”

“It recently changed hands. The new owner chooses to be called ‘X’.”

“Is that supposed to keep his name a secret?”

“Perhaps, but I gather that it is part of his name.”

“What is that name?”

“I’m not sure. I heard the name Jackson, but I don’t know how ‘X’ could be part of that name.”

“Did this ‘X’ order you to use Zombie on innocent people and use them to commit robberies?”

“Yes.”

Again Hattie was frustrated because she had failed to phrase the question properly. “Why did you choose the individuals that you drugged?”

“We left that up to Colbert.”

“Who is Colbert?”

“He works at ‘Stokes’. He is a bartender.”

“But why were these particular individuals chosen?”

“It was a random selection.”

“Why did you consent to go along with this criminal activity?”

“I had large gambling debts. ‘X’ picked up my paper and threatened me. Then he promised large payments if the drug worked as he wanted.”

After placing a large pad of paper in front of him, Hattie gave him one final direction. “Write down everything you know about ‘X’, and then write down how you got involved in this and what your part was.”

He picked up a pen and began to write.

Hattie shut off the recorder and motioned to the mirror that Boyce should join them. A few seconds later he entered. She said, “I’d let him finish writing and then I’d let him sleep it off.”

“I’m not so sure that any of this will be admissible in court.”

“If it isn’t, you will still have leads that you can follow up, plus, you can take this in to Simmons and tell him you have James’ statement and if he doesn’t want to take the full weight of the charges, he should also write up a statement, putting himself in the best light possible.”

Boyce smiled and said, “That’s a very good idea. Thanks!”

Hattie looked at JJ and said to Boyce, “We’re getting married this weekend, so I doubt that we’ll do anything more on this until we are back from our honeymoon.”

Boyce clapped JJ on the back and said, “Congratulations. All the best,” and shook his hand.

They exited and headed for the Planet.

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Tuesday, March 27, 2029

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The headline in the Daily Planet read:

**\*MYSTERIOUS ROBBERIES SOLVED — ARRESTS MADE\***

By — Kaplin and Olsen

The case of the mysterious robberies being performed by individuals with no previous criminal record has been solved.

Researchers at MiraLabs discovered a drug that enabled them to program individuals to perform robberies and then have no memory of doing it.

Based on evidence gathered by the Daily Planet staff, the drug ring has been broken and most of the principals taken into custody. Story continued on 2A.”

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### **Chapter 8 — Rehearsal Dinner**

Wednesday, March 28, 2029

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In an otherwise darkened sanctum lit only by flashing lights on a console and a computer monitor screen, a single light glowed in a shaded lamp over a desk. The front page of Tuesday’s Daily Planet was open. A pair of hands wearing a strange pair of gloves appeared in the light. A pen was picked up and a circle drawn around the article and then a large ‘X’ was drawn through it. Then the hands grabbed the sheet and tore it in pieces in obvious anger. A voice growled, “Kaplin and Olsen

again! Those two have been thwarting me at every turn. Each time I manage to start a project, they queer the pitch. This is the last straw. The problem is that they seem to have a special connection to the superheroes. Each time I try to get rid of them they interfere. I’ve almost lost count of the number of times it has happened.”

A female voice seemed to speak from the air. “If you had more reliable underlings rather than the dregs of the criminal world you might have better luck.”

“Luck has nothing to do with it. It’s like a computer algorithm; you input the data and find out what the result should be. You set the same conditions and expect the same result, but then a random element is introduced and the entire calculation is thrown off.”

“So, how do you plan to handle this?”

“I have to hit them when they least expect it,” ‘X’ replied.

“All right, bright boy, when would that be?” the female voice challenged.

Now that the previous day’s paper had been removed from the desk top, the gloved hands pulled the current edition of the Planet over under the light and opened to the Society Page. Central was the announcement of the wedding of the reporters on the City Desk, Kaplin and Olsen.

He pointed to the article in the paper announcing the upcoming nuptials. Details of the wedding were included.

The hands wearing the strange pair of gloves picked up the pen and a circle drawn around the article. A button was pushed and an underling entered. The underling was addressed, “The rehearsal dinner for this wedding will be on Friday. Call around and see if you can find out where that dinner is to be held. Once you find out, get a couple of guys out there to take them out. I’m tired of them ruining my plans.”

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Friday, March 30, 2029

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Friday evening was the wedding rehearsal. Lara and Mike had flown in for the wedding and were staying at the Wisteria Lane home with Hattie’s soon-to-be aunt and uncle.

The minister had been amazed at the size of the wedding party; twelve aside from the bride and groom would be crowding his platform. He was hoping that the church would hold the guests. This promised to be a very large affair. The notoriety of the principles, the former investigative reporting team of Lane and Kent who were now the Editors-In-Chief of the Daily Planet and the current reporting team of Kaplin and Olsen who had also been making a name for themselves over the last year since their debut as a team would have a lot of friends and family.

With a party this size he tried several arrangements, finally deciding to have only the Matron of Honor and the Best Man on the platform with him, and the bride and groom with the rest arranged on the steps leading to the platform in a ‘V’ pattern, the apex being the bride and groom with him in between them.

The organist found that she had to add several extra bars to the wedding march to accommodate the large party and it took her two walk-throughs to get it right.

After the rehearsal the wedding party went to Café Americana for the reception. It had changed hands after Lois’ Uncle Mike had passed away, but it still was one of the best places in town to eat and because of the founder, it drew the Kent family. On this occasion they were joined by Hattie’s parents.

Years ago, when Hattie first decided on her career and selected Lois Lane as her role model, her parents had been concerned. The number of times they had read articles describing how Lois Lane had needed to be rescued by Superman caused them to fear for their daughter’s safety in that field. When Hattie actually met Lois and started getting close to \*that\* family their fear only increased, that was until they met the Kent family themselves. That coupled with the effect that the association with

the Kent family had on Hattie. She had always been a good student, but being associated with Lois Lane and trying to follow her example had only spurred her to new heights of excellence. Whenever Jon Kent came over to study with Hattie, his respectful conduct and his very gentle spirit finally overcame any anxiety that they might have had. Such an example as he set had to come from a warm loving family. They were actually happy that their girl had found such a good friend.

Hattie had always been very open with her mother and would discuss even matters that some girls would shy away from with a parent. She had, on many occasions, discussed her growing feelings for Jon Kent and her lamentations that he only considered her to be a friend, his best friend admittedly, but just a friend, none the less. The relationship couldn't seem to progress past that stage to Hattie's dismay.

Hattie had gone to her mother for consoling when she found out that Jon had met another girl and that he was going to be moving to Smallville so that he could be close to her. It all happened so quickly. It was a matter of only a week. Initially, her disappointment had manifested as anger toward this new girl that had stolen \*her\* boyfriend from her. That changed rapidly when she finally met Jennifer and got to know her. Seeing how she and Jon related to one another, she realized that their relationship was such as none she had ever seen before aside from Lois and Clark. Then thinking about it some more she realized that the relationship that Lara and Mike shared was also like that. She began to hope that she would have that kind of relationship when she found the right guy. Then JJ had come back into her life.

JJ, Jon and she were all the same age. They had spent a lot of time together as teens. She had always liked JJ. Jon's cousin was a little overweight and very sensitive about it, but it never bothered Hattie; she liked him as a person and didn't care about his weight. There were lots of times that they would be playing games and she and JJ would team up against Jon and Lara and Hattie was usually pleased with the outcome because most of the time, they won.

When she had been paired with him at Jen's wedding, she almost didn't recognize him. They hadn't seen each other for a few years. They had been in different schools and then he had hired on at the Gotham Gazette.

When she saw him at the rehearsal for Jen's wedding she was shocked. He had dropped the excess weight and really built himself up. He had taken up the martial arts and weight lifting and it had done wonders. He had bulked up and was ever so much stronger, but the martial arts had given him a lithe grace characteristic of a practitioner. Later, he had confided in her that she had been his inspiration for getting his weight under control and all of the rest of it. As far back as their teen years he had determined that she was the one that he wanted as a wife and he wanted to become what she deserved.

Hattie's parents had been invited on numerous occasions to affairs, birthday parties and holidays, at the Kent home and had met JJ at those times. In this last year, ever since Hattie had been teamed up with him, they'd had more opportunities to get to know him and had found that even cousins of the Kent family displayed the same strength of character that they had observed in the Kents and when she had accepted JJ's proposal they heartily approved of Hattie's choice of a life mate. The only reservation they had was the number of times that their daughter had been in danger over the last year.

A room at the back had been set aside for the use of the wedding party for the rehearsal dinner and they all had a pleasant meal.

Jack and Melissa (Mel) Kaplin sat at the table with Lois and Clark as did Hattie and JJ, Jimmy and Lucy Olsen. This was the first time that they had met JJ's parents. They knew James Olsen by reputation as a famous photojournalist with the Planet, but this evening they found out that on the side, he had a computer

business called 'White Hats On Call'. The company specialized in contracting with corporations to do penetration testing to discover security flaws in their networks.

Among the first to leave were Jon and Jen. It was Jon's turn to do a patrol and he was going to fly Jen home first. They had only been together about a year and a half so her body was not ready for the pendant to infuse her with the superpowers yet.

Shortly after Jon and Jen, Jack and Mel with Jimmy and Lucy left. Jack and Jimmy were discussing contracting White Hats to test his corporate network, which had recently suffered an intrusion.

After the festivities the attendees started leaving, as couples.

Sean and Celeste were the next to leave because they were due on duty at the hospital. They were just starting their internships and were beginning their clinical rotations, but they would be off shift in time to change for the ceremony.

Jessica, James Perry, Lucy and Sam had all car-pooled so they all left together.

Lois and Clark, Lara and Mike were still talking as Hattie and JJ prepared to exit. Lois said, "Now, remember, you need to be at the house at ten to get dressed. The seamstress dropped the gown off at the house this afternoon. She said that she has never had to rush the fittings like this before. She usually likes to have more time. Your mom will be there with the rest of us. JJ, Clark will meet you at the church at ten-thirty."

Hattie chuckled and said, "Got it, 'Momma' Lois." She and JJ turned and headed out through the doors.

Stationed outside the restaurant, unknown to those inside, were a pair of gunmen. They had a picture of the red-haired couple that was their target.

As they exited the café, JJ helped Hattie on with a jacket. It had been somewhat overcast all day and it was the end of March so it was a bit cool.

One of the gunmen nudged the other and said, "There they are. It has to be them. That red hair is distinctive. Let's go." They got out of their car and stood across the street from the couple and when they had come abreast the first one shouted, "Kaplin and Olsen!" Then he sneered, "The hottest team in town! Hah! Try some hot lead!" They both opened up with automatic weapons.

Hattie and JJ had both been startled and as soon as JJ realized what was happening he threw himself between the gunmen and Hattie, but he wasn't fast enough.

Lois and Clark, Lara and Mike heard the shouts in the street and then the gunfire. They had been the only ones left so all four spun into their uniforms and took off through the window. Coming down on the sidewalk they evaluated the scene. Clark did an x-ray of JJ while Lois x-rayed Hattie. As she did, Hattie recovered consciousness long enough to weakly say, "JJ," before she passed out again.

Looking across the street they saw the two gunmen sprawled out on the sidewalk, obviously unconscious, and Kam-El standing over them, staring across the street at the wounded couple. The expression on his face was one of pain and sorrow. He was also angry! Oh, so angry! Angry at the two at his feet for what they had done and angry at himself for not getting there sooner and protecting Hattie and JJ.

Clark sent a thought, "JJ has only minutes to live. He's been hit in the liver, spleen, lung, kidney, intestine and there is one bullet lodged very near his heart."/

Lois sent, "Almost the same for Hattie. They missed her spleen and heart. What can we do? Take them to the ER?"/

"I don't think that will help."/ There was a pause of several seconds, before he continued, "Pick up Hattie and follow me. We have only one chance."/

Lois picked up Hattie as she sent, "Where are we going?"/

As Superman took to the sky, he replied, "Perpetual Pines Cemetery."/

Lois followed, but was mystified and sent, /"Why there?"/  
/"Gretchen Kelly's machine. It was sealed up, but never dismantled."/

Remembering the incident, Lois sent, /"Do you think it will work?"/

Clark was grim as he replied, /"It has to! It's their only chance."/

Seeing Ultra Woman and Superman take to the sky, Ultra Woman 2 and Torque followed. When they landed in front of a mausoleum at a cemetery Lara said, "They're not dead yet, why bring them to a cemetery?"

Lois replied, "This may be their only chance."

Lara was totally mystified, but trusted her mom and dad to do what they needed to do.

Superman said, "Torque, I need you to open that door. Time is of the essence, so don't worry about damaging it."

Torque grabbed the door and ripped it off of its hinges.

As they entered, Clark said, "Shove that casket aside and stand out of the way"

Lois shouted, "Wait!" She nodded in the direction of the light sconce on the wall as she said, "Turn that sconce a quarter turn to the right."

Lara turned the light fixture and the trapdoor opened.

Descending the stairs they noted a thick layer of dust on everything and there were no footprints so it appeared as though everything was undisturbed. Clark placed his burden on the left hand platform. As he pointed at the various mechanisms he was speaking about he said, "Lara, throw that switch, that's the power." Once this had been done he said, "Now throw that lever. Watch that dial. When the pointer is in the red, stop it. If you don't it'll transfer all of my powers."

Lara followed his directions to the letter. There was an artificial lightning display and Lara watched the needle. When it hit the red she moved the lever and once the lever had been moved back to neutral she noted that the needle had stayed in the red. Clark again picked up JJ and moved him so that Lois could place Hattie there. This time Lara stepped onto the right hand plate. Superman said, "What are you doing?"

"We don't want to take a chance of draining you too much. Come on, we don't have all day! Throw that lever."

Realizing that she was right Clark stepped over to the control and operated it. After another lightning display; as soon as the needle hit the red, he moved the lever back. Again the needle stayed in the red.

Lara tried her x-ray vision and was able to see through Hattie. She checked and didn't find any bullets. She looked at the floor of the platform that JJ and then Hattie had been on and saw a small scattering of bullets on the floor.

A few seconds later, JJ woke up. Immediately he started patting his body. He saw places where his blood had soaked his clothing. Then he remembered and started looking around as he shouted in an anguished tone, "Hattie!"

In a feeble tone, she replied, "Right here, tiger."

He jumped up and knelt next to her. He pulled her into his arms and weeping said, "I thought I had lost you."

She asked, "What did you think you were doing, throwing yourself into the line of fire like that?"

Suddenly realizing what she was saying, she looked down at herself and saw that her clothes were a bloody mess. She looked at JJ and saw the same thing. She stared incredulously and in a hushed tone asked, "How???"

She looked up into the face of Lois, Ultra Woman, and said, "You guys saved us again, but we were shot! I remember. It hurt so much. And now ... it doesn't hurt anymore. How long were we out?" Looking around and noting the stone walls she said, "This definitely isn't the ER. What happened?"

Lois asked, "Think you can stand?"

JJ helped her upright.

Lois handed JJ an iron bar that had been lying nearby, part of what looked like a prison cell at the side of the room. She said, "Okay, strong man, bend this."

In appearances it was an iron bar although it didn't appear to weigh anything. Either she believed that it was metal and didn't know the difference, or else this was a trick that they were playing on Hattie to make her think that he was stronger than he really was. He decided to go along with the gag. "Aw, come on Aunt Lois, yeah, I lift weights, but you know I'm not \*that\* strong."

Lois raised an eyebrow and just said, "Trust me. Try to bend it."

With a dubious expression he said, "Okay, but don't be too surprised if I fail." He prepared to apply maximum effort to the task she had set him. He got a good grip on either end and with a look of concentration and a sudden movement he brought his hands together. He let out a squawk and dropped the bar as if it had bitten him. It was bent in half and it hadn't even taken that much effort to do it. His eyes were wide and staring at the bar as it clattered to the floor with a very solid clang. He was surprised when he heard that sound. The ease with which he had bent it had convinced him that it was plastic.

Lois picked up another bar. She handed it to Hattie and said, "Your turn."

Hattie said, "Huh? JJ's the weight lifter, not me."

Lois proffered the bar and said, "Here, give it a try."

Hattie took it. It sure looked solid. She used it to tap the floor and it gave the ring of metal, but it didn't have any discernible weight. She looked at Lois with a question in her eyes.

Lois said, "Trust me, Hattie girl. Try to bend it."

Hattie grasped it as she had seen JJ do and brought her hands together bending the bar in half. She challenged, "What is this, some kind of plastic?"

Lois shook her head and said, "Nope, one inch of solid steel."

With a mystified expression she asked, "But ... how?"

Lois smiled and said, "Welcome to the \*super\*family."

JJ said, "Super, but we aren't on that side of the family! That's you guys."

Lois said, "It looks like you need a little more convincing. Close your eyes and think happy thoughts like Peter Pan and try to float."

Hattie and JJ both closed their eyes in obvious concentration and slowly both started to smile. As they did they both left the floor and when they were a couple of feet up, Lois said, "Open your eyes, you two."

When they did, the first thing they saw was each other and their smiles broadened. Obviously the happy thoughts had been about each other. Then they realized that something didn't look right and they glanced around. Seeing the rest below them they realized they were floating and crashed to the floor.

Hattie was the first to recover and said, "Wow," and continued in a hushed tone, "super. We're ... super!" She looked at Lois and asked, "Just like you?"

"Yeah, just like me. You can thank Lara. She was the source."

"Is this going to make her lose some of her powers?"

Clark said, "No, we were careful. What she gave you will regenerate as soon as she is in sunlight. The nice thing is that, from previous experience, your powers should be permanent and renew just the same way. Resplendent Man didn't lose his powers until they were stripped from him by this machine."

JJ asked, "Who was the source for me?"

Clark answered, "That would be me."

JJ shook his head in awe. Superman had just given him some of his life force.

"Why did you guys do this?"

Lois addressed them and as she did they both turned toward her. "You were both dying. You would have been dead within only a couple of minutes. If Clark," she nodded in his direction,

“hadn’t thought of this machine, we would have lost you.”

Hattie was surprised that even here where it was basically dark she could see the sheen of tears in Lois’ eyes; then she realized that it was her super vision that enabled her to see it.

She moved over to Lara and threw her arms around her in a hug and said, “Thanks, cousin.”

Lara returned the hug and said, “The one you really need to thank is Pop. It was his idea that saved you.”

Hattie let Lara go and approached Clark. As she reached to hug him she said, “Thanks, Uncle Clark. Thanks for everything. Thanks for saving my life, once again.” Clark could feel his Suit getting wet from her tears of gratitude.

He wrapped his arms around her and said, “I couldn’t allow anything to happen to \*our girl\* or our nephew either,” he glanced at JJ who was hugging Lois. “You and JJ are family, every bit as much as Jon and Lara, and nothing will change that now. Oh, speaking of Jon, there’s someone I need to speak to.” Clark sent a thought, /”Jon, where are you?"/

/”About 30,000 feet.”/

/”What are you doing that high?"/

/”I’m about to drop a couple of pieces of garbage in the ocean.”/

/”Jon ... look, I know that I taught you better than that, Son. We do not act as judge and jury.”/

/”This time it’s different. This was family, can’t you see that? Hattie ... Hattie was like a sister to me. JJ was my cousin and these two vermin ...”/

/”Jon, listen to me! The wedding is still on! Everything is okay. We got to them in time.”/

/”Huh? How? I saw them. I was sure they were dead. I x-rayed them. They were each hit with about half a dozen bullets. How could they have survived?"/

/”Take my word for it, Son, they are alive and well and there is a bonus. We aren’t going to have to worry about them anymore.”/

/”Why are you lying to me? You’ve never done that before.”/

The others were standing around him and could see the play of emotions on his face as he communicated with Jon. /”I’m not lying to you, Son.”/ Clark shook his head in denial.

/”The only way we wouldn’t have to worry about them anymore would be if they were dead.”/

/”No, Jon, there is another way.”/

/”Really? You need to convince me quickly, before I throw out this trash.”/

/”Jon, Hattie and JJ are standing right here next to me and they are as alive as ever, in fact they are healthier than they have ever been in their lives.”/

/”How could that be?"/

/”I knew we had to do something so we took a chance and it worked. Hattie and JJ are now superpowered.”/

There was a mental gasp and then, /”Really? How?"/

/”We can explain it later. Right now you need to turn those two over to the MPD so that they can face attempted murder charges.”/

/”Right, Pop, I’m on the way.”/

/”Good! Hattie and JJ are headed home, but I don’t think they’d mind a brief visit. Just keep it short, remember we have a wedding to attend.”/

/”Right, Pop. I’ll keep it short ... And, thanks.”/

/”For saving their lives?"/

/”For that and also for keeping me from doing something I would have regretted for the rest of my life.”/

/”Don’t mention it, Son. See you at the church.”/

Clark summarized for the group, “I just spoke with Jon. He’s turning the shooters over to the MPD. I got to him just in time. He was about to do something ... rash.”

Lois had a worried look as she asked, “He wasn’t taking the law into his own hands, was he?”

“I’m afraid so and actually, I find it hard to blame him. I can’t tell you the number of times I almost did when something happened to you. It was a near thing, but he’s settled now.”

Turning to Hattie and JJ he said, “He’ll be stopping by, just to reassure himself that you’re okay.”

“We’ll wait up for him.”

Lois said, “Hey, I just remembered, we have a wedding to go to tomorrow, and the two of you are indispensable. I think we need to get out of here. Clark, we need to seal this up again.”

“Right you are.” He turned to JJ and Hattie as he continued, “It will take you some time to master your powers. I’d suggest that after your honeymoon we take some time to go to Smallville. That’s where each of the kids learned to control their powers. I think that your boss will see fit to give you some extra vacation, but there will be a string attached.”

Hattie asked, “What would that be?”

“Find the one responsible for the shooting and bring them to justice.”

“Nothing would give me more pleasure.”

Lois said, “Keep in mind, now you have a secret that you need to protect.”

Chagrined, Hattie said, “I hadn’t thought about that. How do we explain this?”

Mike suggested, “How about, since the sniper attempt, you have been wearing bullet proof vests?”

JJ smiled, “Just the thing. Yeah, that will work. In fact, we can start wearing them under our work clothes, just in case they try again.”

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## Chapter 9 — The Wedding

March 31, 2029

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At ten the next morning JJ dropped Hattie off at the Kent home and headed for the church. Hattie’s dress was there waiting for her to put it on and Lois and all of the girls including Mel Kaplin took turns helping button her into it.

There was a cavalcade of cars that left the house and headed for the church. Once everyone was in position the signal was given to the organist and she started the prelude.

Hattie had a final minute with her mom.

“Hattie, you have been looking forward to this day for a while now and I just know that he is not going to disappoint you. Over this last year we have seen how he treats you and he is a good man.”

“I know he is, Mom. He’s special and I couldn’t love him more.”

“I’m happy for you. My little girl. My little girl’s all grown up and today she starts a family of her own.” Mel started weeping, but not tears of sadness or regret, tears of joy for she knew that her daughter would be well-cared-for and loved. Smiling, she gave Hattie a hug and a kiss on the cheek before she turned away and took Jon Kent’s proffered arm. He had insisted on the honor of escorting Mel down the aisle to her place in the front pew.

Hattie’s father gave her a hug and asked, “Are you ready for this, little one?”

Hattie had returned the hug and when her dad winced she realized that she had applied too much pressure. Calmly she replied, “I’ve never been more ready for anything in my whole life.” She thought, <I’m going to have to be careful. I’m not used to being this strong. I just hope I don’t start to float up there on the platform. Oh well, it is a long gown. The train may conceal it if I do.>

The seating of Mel was the signal for the organist to begin the Wedding March. Lucy, being the youngest, was first down the aisle followed by Jessica, Celeste, Lara and then Jen as Bridesmaids. Lois as Matron of Honor immediately preceded Hattie and the wedding was underway.

Clark kept what appeared to be a supportive hand on JJ, but this was actually at JJ's request, to make sure he didn't float.

After the wedding there were pictures taken and then the party went to the hall that had been rented for the reception.

A good time was had by all and after the cake was cut the newlyweds left on their honeymoon. As tradition demanded, after they had changed they passed through the gauntlet and were pelted with, not rice, but birdseed.

The Best Man and Matron of Honor disappeared at the same time as the bride and groom but after a short time returned to host, along with the Kaplins and Olsens, the festivities.

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The reason that Lois and Clark had left was so that they could take Hattie and JJ to their honeymoon resort.

At the last second the plans for the honeymoon had been changed. The decision was made for the young couple to spend a week at the Kent farm in Smallville. They would have the privacy that they wanted like any newlyweds and there would be less chance of accidentally revealing just what they could now do.

Martha and Jonathan, now in their eighties, still lived on the farm and had decided not to attend the wedding in Metropolis as it might have been a little much for them. Over the last few years, they had resisted all of Lois and Clark's efforts to have them give up the farm and move to Metropolis. They always said that what they had was better than any system that 'old folks' used to call for help in an emergency. All they had to do was carry a cell phone. One speed dial button push and there would be a super family member there within seconds, a much faster response than waiting for an ambulance. The family had insisted on Jonathan giving up on operating the farm, thus, in the growing season, there were farm hands hired to do the work. Clark could foresee the day when the amount of acreage planted was reduced or eliminated. The land was only being worked because of Jonathan.

A few years earlier, at the insistence of Lois and Clark, the farmhouse had been remodeled. A larger family room in the form of a Florida room had been added that joined the original house and the new wing that had been added. There was a home theater set up with a very large screen HDTV and a sound system, lounge chairs and game tables. The existing family room had been converted into the new master bedroom suite so that the senior Kents would not have to deal with the stairs any longer.

With the assistance of Superman and Ultra Woman, Hattie and JJ made it to Smallville. Hattie had met the elder Kents years earlier and JJ had grown up knowing them. Clark led them into the new wing and showed them which room they could use and then joined Lois and his parents in the kitchen. It was later in the evening, but since Jonathan was no longer working the farm himself, he had started keeping later hours.

Addressing his folks he said, "I've got some news. JJ and Hattie are now super."

Martha and Jonathan had a questioning look as Martha asked, "How did that happen, Clark?"

"They had both been shot and it was the only way to keep them from dying. It was a risky procedure, but we had to try. We had no other options ... and it worked. They were married today and we'd like them to stay here for their honeymoon. They need some time to master their new powers. Could you guys help them ... the way you helped me and all of the kids?"

Jonathan and Martha both brightened up and Jonathan said, "We'd be happy to! They'll have to be careful when the farm hands are here. Fortunately, the planting is done. They'll only be here for maintenance until it is closer to harvest."

Just then Hattie and JJ made their way into the kitchen. Martha said, "Welcome to chez Kent. Clark was just telling us what happened. He asked us to help you master your new powers the same way we helped guide him. We understand how it is. We were honeymooners once ourselves. Since there isn't anyone else

here right now but you and us, you should have the privacy you need."

Turning to Clark, Jonathan asked, "Do you have any spare glasses here?"

Clark snapped his fingers and asked, "Now, why didn't I think of that? I'll be right back." He stepped out onto the porch and took off.

Hattie asked the question that she was sure was forefront in JJ's mind as well as hers. "Glasses? What are the glasses for?"

Martha explained, "They were an integral part of Clark's training. They really don't correct his vision. They are lead crystal. It blocks his x-ray vision. You'll need them until you get used to controlling it. They will also make you aware of it if your heat vision kicks in unexpectedly. I hope Clark put you in his and Lois' room. That bed is specially reinforced. If you start to float in your sleep and fall when you wake up, it won't break. It will also stand up to, shall we say, energetic activity."

Hattie was blushing at this frank talk.

Martha started to chuckle at her discomfiture.

Lois started to chuckle and addressed her question to Hattie. "Did I ever tell you about the first time I met Jonathan and Martha?"

Hattie shook her head.

"Clark and I had just been teamed up and I wasn't even sure how the partnership would work out. Actually, I was resenting Perry teaming us up, but we were here on this story. Since it was his hometown and we were together, Martha and Jonathan offered to let us stay here. Boy, that's another story. It was the Corn Festival and even if we had wanted to stay somewhere else, there were no rooms available anywhere. Well, here we are. We walk in, first time I'd ever met Martha and she asks if Clark and I would be sharing his room. I was shocked! I didn't know her. I really didn't know her son that well and here she is asking if we were sleeping together. It got me to thinking about what kind of history my partner had as far as girlfriends was concerned, I'll tell you." Lois got up and grabbed Martha in a loving hug. "Then I got to know her better and really love her. This is one special lady. When you really get to know her, you'll discover just why your Uncle Clark is the way he is." She put an arm around Jonathan and said, "These two have to be the best parents in the world. To have a child thrust upon them, to have him develop super powers and to be able to keep him grounded and good ... that's what I call special." She gave Jonathan and Martha each a kiss on the cheek before she released them.

Clark walked back in. He had two pairs of glasses in hand. He said, "Sorry I took so long. I had to stop at an optical store and buy a new pair of frames, ladies frames, and fit the lenses." He handed a pair of glasses to Hattie and a pair to JJ. "Here, try these on for size." They both tried them on and after a little tweaking they were fitted properly.

JJ said, "You actually look good in glasses. That is a nice frame style for you."

"The reason I brought them is for your training, but if you want to keep using them to help with your secret, that's fine too."

Hattie looked at JJ and said, "They give you an air of sophistication."

Lois said, "Well, I guess we'll be on our way. You two are starting your honeymoon and we would just be in the way. Besides, we have to get back to the party."

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Before Hattie and JJ headed off, Martha said, "We don't stand on ceremony around here. The kitchen is available when you need it. If you want to join us for meals, well, there's always plenty to go around. You, young lady, could use some filling out and you, JJ, I remember when you could have stood to lose a few pounds. Looks like that has been taken care of. We will be having dinner at 7 if you care to join us. Pot roast with all the fixin's. Now, get out of here. I'm sure that you don't want to spend your

wedding night with us old folks.”

Hattie decided right then and there that she loved this woman and moving over to her gave her a hug and a kiss. After the kiss she asked, “Would you mind terribly if I called you ‘Grammy?’”

Martha smiled and said, “You can call me anything you want, as long as it isn’t late to supper. Now, go on and get out of here so Jonathan and I can have some alone time.”

Hattie could tell by Martha’s expression that she had been pleased by Hattie’s request. She said, “Come on, husband, we need to leave these two lovebirds alone,” and hooking her arm through his started to lead him back to the bedroom so that they could unpack. As they were exiting, Hattie said, “See you at dinner.”

Jonathan reminded, “Don’t forget about the time change. We are an hour behind Metropolis time.”

Hattie snickered and said, “Right, we wouldn’t want to come down an hour early and interrupt something, would we, JJ?”

JJ smiled and said, “Not on your life. I know how it is when you want time alone with your spouse.”

Chuckling, Jonathan said, “Go on with you! Get out of here with all that.”

Hattie said, “Okay, Grandpa. We’re going. Come on, JJ, let’s go unpack. We can relax a while before dinner.”

As they were departing, Jonathan said, “In the family room is a home theater. We have satellite TV and there are a lot of DVDs in the cabinet.”

Hattie said, “All the comforts of home!”

Martha said, “Make this your home away from home. You’re all family.”

“We will, Grammy, we will. See you guys later.”

After unpacking they saw that they had some time yet until dinner. Hattie said, “I think I’ll take a nice long shower.”

JJ asked, “Do you need me to scrub your back?”

With a smile, Hattie replied, “Are you reading my mind?”

JJ had a thoughtful expression as he replied, “No, I wasn’t, but you know, now that you mention it, I think that is one of the powers we now have. Let’s give it a try.” He started concentrating, but a thought intruded. He thought that maybe he should ask Uncle Clark how it was done and suddenly he got a message, “You need to think about who you want to communicate with.” JJ was shocked and replied, “Who is this?”

He received a mental chuckle and then, “It’s Uncle Clark. You were thinking about asking me how the telepathy works. I got your message and replied. All you need to do, if you want to communicate with Hattie, is think about her and what you want to communicate. Beware; it can be a very intimate form of communication. It can be intoxicating if used at the right time. I need to get back to the party. Don’t forget, think about Hattie.”

Hattie had seen a strange expression on JJ’s face for several seconds. When he smiled and looked at her she asked, “What was that all about?”

“It worked! Only thing is, it was Uncle Clark that answered. I was thinking about him and we connected. He told me how it’s done. Here, let’s try.” He stared at Hattie, filling his mind with her and sent, “I love you.”

Hattie started to smile and said, “I heard that! Let me try.” “Let’s get into the shower before we run out of time.”

In answer JJ started to remove his clothes.

Hattie smiled and said, “It worked, didn’t it?”

JJ’s reply was succinct, “It sure did. Let’s get into the shower.”

Very quickly they were in the shower together. They discovered a tube of body scrub gel and used it to wash each other. When they left the shower they dried each other off and then moved to the bed.

The shower time had been more foreplay than shower and they were both ready to join their bodies.

JJ decided to put Uncle Clark’s suggestion to the test. As they started an intimate episode he initiated a mental link. He could feel her reaction. Her eyes flew wide as she realized what was happening and she started to groan with desire. Emotions flashed across her face. Desire, joy, rapture, and she started to move. He began to move in concert. When both had finished, they were both completely spent. Hattie collapsed on his chest and just lay there playing with the hairs on his chest while he stroked her back. She looked up at him as she moved her hand up and cupped his cheek. “Wow, that was super fantastic, stupendous. There aren’t enough words to describe it. It’s indescribable.”

“I know, I wonder if this is the same thing that Uncle Clark and Aunt Lois share. What am I saying; it was Uncle Clark that suggested it. Compared to what we just did, the sex we’ve been experiencing was a pale shadow of what it could have been.”

“I’m surprised; I’m actually tired after that. I haven’t been tired since we became super.”

“I don’t think it’s tiredness in that sense. I think it is just supersatisfaction.”

Hattie yawned as she said, “You may be right, but I think I’m gonna take a nap. Right here.”

After a short nap they dressed and moved down to the family room. Hattie found a DVD in the cabinet and said, “We \*have\* to watch this one.”

“Which one is it?”

She hid it from him as she put it into the player. “I want it to be a surprise. Afterwards, I’ll tell you the story of the first time I saw this movie.”

Suddenly there was a blazing comet crossing the screen and then the title appeared in the comet’s tail; finally a space ship came out of warp and crossed the screen.

After the movie Hattie told JJ about how one night she had watched this particular movie with Jon and Lara and how she had come to the conclusion that Superman and Ultra Woman used appearance generators to look human. By the time she was finished they were both laughing at her conclusions. Then it was time for dinner and they joined Martha and Jonathan.

Over dinner Hattie asked, “When do we start our training?”

Jonathan asked, “How soon do you want to start? I would think you two would want at least a few days to yourselves.”

Looking over at Martha he said, “I remember our honeymoon. We just wanted to be alone, together, which was fine. As a farmer, we were never rich so we didn’t go anywhere fancy, but that didn’t matter, we had each other, a room and a bed.”

Martha reached over and swatted his arm. Hattie noticed that even though she did this it was obviously playing because there was no flushing of Martha’s cheeks as there would be if she were embarrassed by his statement. Martha said, “Jonathan Kent, be good. You’re gonna give these kids the wrong impression.”

Jonathan smiled and looking at Hattie and JJ, he said, “Every word is the truth.”

Hattie and JJ were both laughing at the byplay. Finally, JJ said, “No, we really want to start learning how to handle these powers.”

Jonathan smiled and said, “Okay, well, tomorrow is Sunday. Take that as a rest day from all of your exertions.” Hattie and JJ both blushed at that one. Jonathan continued, “We will start on Monday.”

After they finished dinner Hattie and JJ both helped with the dishes before saying goodnight to Martha and Jonathan and heading to their room.

They spent the rest of the night and the next day exploring the extreme intimacy of using telepathy during intimate moments, minutes and hours, only taking time to join Martha and Jonathan for meals and an occasional movie.

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After breakfast on Monday, Jonathan took them outside and said, “Let’s start simple. The first power that Clark had was

superhearing. See what you can hear. Concentrate and see how \*much\* you can hear.”

He could see the look of concentration on both of their faces. Suddenly Hattie looked aside and spotted a grasshopper munching on a leaf and happily said, “I can hear that and I can hear your heartbeat,” and looking at JJ she said, “I can hear yours too. Is this the way it is for Uncle Clark and Aunt Lois?”

Jonathan chuckled and said, “I’m pretty sure it is.”

“Ouch, it’s like you’re shouting now. Wow! How do they control it?” She put her hands over her ears. “Things are getting louder and louder! How do I turn it off?”

“You have to concentrate on one thing. Clark usually tunes in on Lois’ heartbeat. He says that it soothes him.”

The pained expression that had been growing on Hattie’s face slowly faded. She said, “Yeah, that works. I’m listening to JJ’s heartbeat. It helps to shut everything else out.”

“When you want to listen to something else just think about what you want to hear and block out the rest.” Jonathan directed. “If Clark is trying to listen to a conversation, he looks at the lip movements and tries to match what he hears to what he is seeing.”

JJ wasn’t saying much. He was following Jonathan’s directions as was Hattie and smiling as he listened to her heartbeat. He found that there were subtle fluctuations, which by observing her facial expressions, he could link to emotional changes, mostly joy, surprise and wonder. He was having fun just watching and listening to her.

Hattie asked, “Grandpa, it seemed like our hearing wasn’t, oh, I don’t know, it wasn’t turned on, until we thought about it. Is that normal?”

Jonathan thought about it for a second then said, “You just acquired the powers. Clark’s developed slowly, over time, as he grew up. There’s really no way to know. From what he said about how this was done, all we have to go by is how it happened with Mr. Waldeck and he really didn’t give any details.”

Eager to explore her new powers, Hattie asked, “What’s next?”

Jonathan laughed and said, “Patience, little one, patience. You’ll learn all about what you can do, just take your time and make sure you master each one as we go. By the time you go back to Metropolis you want to have complete mastery of your powers so that you don’t accidentally give yourself away. Have you decided if you are going to help Lois and Clark or not?”

Hattie looked at JJ and said, “We really haven’t discussed that yet. What do you think, honey?”

JJ was lost in thought for a few seconds before he said, “We could be a force for good, helping stop crimes and preserving life right there beside them. Just thinking about it gives me a good feeling. I say, let’s do it.”

Hattie started to smile and said, “I agree. I want to do it too. Let’s work on mastering these powers.”

Jonathan said, “Well, now that that decision has been made, I think Martha just got herself a couple of new customers.”

JJ asked, “What do you mean?”

Jonathan snickered and said, “Didn’t you ever wonder where all of the super suits came from?”

“I never really thought about it.”

“They’re all from ‘Chez Martha, Couturier to the super powered’! Did you think Clark made his own Suit? His mom made it for him. She also made Lois’ and Jon’s, Lara’s and Mike’s. I don’t know who will take over when she can’t sew anymore. One of you girls will have to take over. Another thing you need to do is decide on a secret identity.”

“Wow, I never thought it would be so difficult,” Hattie complained.

JJ chuckled and said, “It’s like the old saying, ‘No pain, no gain.’”

Putting her hands on her chest and abdomen she said, “Yeah,

I still remember the pain. I’m glad I’ll never have to go through that again. Once was more than enough.” With renewed vigor she said, “Come on, JJ, we need to master these powers so that we can get the one behind that attack. Grandpa, I think we have a handle on the hearing. What’s next?”

“Let’s try telescopic vision. You see that fence post at the far end of the field? See if you can tell me how many strands of wire are attached.”

JJ looked and said, “I see two strands.”

Jonathan said, “We need to work on that. There should be three strands.”

JJ laughed and said, “Yes, there should be, but one is broken. I can see the two ends lying on the ground on either side of the post.”

Jonathan let out a sigh and said, “Okay, looks like your telescopic vision works and I need to get the hands to fix that section of fence.”

Over the next week, Jonathan guided them through each of their new powers, the last being flight.

Before they took their first flight, however, Martha made each of them their new uniforms.

Because of a fire that Hattie had created while trying to master her heat vision, she decided to call herself ‘Blaze’ and Martha made what looked like flames of fire and put the El Crest over it so that it was surrounded by fire.

Through their training, JJ had shown more patience than Hattie and Jonathan had said, more than once, that he had the patience of a saint. That stuck in JJ’s mind so when it came time to choose a super persona he chose ‘Saint’. Martha accommodated him when she made his suit by putting an El crest on the chest and then, using gold-colored spandex, made an ellipse and sewed it on above the crest at about a thirty-degree angle so that it looked like a halo worn at a jaunty angle.

When they were ready and in costume they started with some short flights at different heights and speeds. Finally they took off together on an around-the-world flight.

After half an hour, Jonathan was becoming concerned.

After forty-five minutes he was downright worried.

It had been just over two hours when they landed and Jonathan heaved a relieved sigh. Then he noticed the mud.

They were both flushed with excitement and they were hugging each other.

Jonathan asked, “What happened? You were gone more than two hours.”

“As we were passing Metropolis we saw Uncle Clark, Aunt Lois and Jon heading south so we joined them. It was a mudslide in Tegucigalpa. We helped rescue about twenty people each; about half of them were children. Between us ... we saved ... about twenty children and their parents. We made a difference!”

Jonathan was smiling as he said, “That’s enough training for one day. Go clean up. Watch a movie or something.”

As they headed for the new wing, Jonathan joined Martha and told her what had happened.

Martha quickly whipped up a batter and put on a cake to bake. They were going to celebrate. She called the Daily Planet and spoke to Lois.

At 7 p.m., as they were finishing up on dinner, suddenly in walked Jon and Jen, Lois and Clark, and Lara and Mike.

Hattie and JJ were surprised, but happy to see everyone.

Addressing Hattie and JJ, Martha said, “I called them here so that we could celebrate your graduation. Clark, you have anything to say?”

“I sure do! You kids did great today. Thanks to your help we were able to save a lot more people that we could have otherwise. Lois?”

“I’ll echo what Clark said. You guys did a great job today. Because of your help there are a lot of kids that will live a full life that otherwise wouldn’t have. Now, you’re really part of the

super family. That was a terrific debut. By the way, I love the costumes. What are your names?"

Hattie said, "I'm 'Blaze' and he's 'Saint'."

Lois laughed and said, "I suppose there is a story that goes along with each name, but I'll wait." She took Hattie in her arms and gave her a hug.

Martha brought out the cake and they had a celebration.

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## Chapter 10 — Mr. X

Monday, April 2, 2029

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'X' had seen the report of his minions being arrested and charged with attempted murder. He shouted into space, "Attempted\* murder!!!! That means that they failed! What is it with this couple? They seem to lead charmed lives. It had to be those blasted superheroes again! Years ago, it was Superman, Clark Kent and Lois Lane that foiled my plans. Because of them, I lost the program!"

"The gunmen failed and now Kaplin and Olsen are married. They're away on their honeymoon at some undisclosed location so there's no way to get them now. If they know too much they can cause problems when they get back. They might even let Lane and Kent know what they found out while they are away. We must take precautions."

The female voice challenged, "What can you do? You can't leave this hideout. You depend on minions to do your dirty work."

"I may have time to plan while they are on their honeymoon."

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Tuesday, April 3, 2029

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The light flicked on over the desk in the darkened room. The gloved hands appeared and spread out the latest copy of the Daily Planet.

The headline of Tuesday's Planet read:

"STRANGE ROBBERIES SOLVED — NEW DRUG RESPONSIBLE"

By Kaplin and Olsen

A new drug synthesized at MiraLabs is responsible for the rash of odd robberies. Two chemists have been arrested and bound over for trial. Story continues page A2"

"Aaaarrrrrrgggggggg! I've lost, I've lost, \*I've lost\*! James and Simmons were working on the delta form and they were not finished. Now they will never finish! My plan for world dominion is ruined ... ruined, I say!!"

The female voice challenged, "So, you're going to just give up on your plan? Are they the only ones that can do this job? I thought that no one was indispensable."

"You may be right. Set up a search; look for anyone working on drugs like these. Search all trade publications. I don't care what country. Just find them."

"I'm not programmed to read oriental characters or Arabic."

"So search everything else and look for translations of those articles."

"Searching."

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Monday, April 9, 2029

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Hattie and JJ returned on Monday morning. As soon as they were in the bullpen Lois called them to the office. "Welcome back, you two. Are you ready to get to work?"

Hattie reached up and adjusted her new glasses on her nose, smiled and said, "Another week with Grammy and Grandpa would have been fun, but not necessary."

Lois interrupted, "Grammy and Grandpa, huh? One would think you like the Kents."

Hattie looked at JJ and seeing his nod answered, "Like them?"

We love them. They are like another set of grandparents. Are we ready to get back to work? We are ready to go after the creep that's behind all of this. We may have a lead. We are after 'X', but under the influence of the drug, Dr. James gave away a name. It seems to be unrelated, but you never can tell. Here, let me play the tape."

/\*Hattie: "Are you the inventor of Zombie?"

Dr. James: "Yes."

Hattie: "Who was involved in the creation of the Zombie formula?"

Dr. James: "Myself and Dr. Simmons."

Hattie: "Who funded the project?"

Dr. James: "It was funded through MiraLabs."

Hattie: "Who is behind MiraLabs?"

Dr. James: "It recently changed hands. The new owner chooses to be called 'X'."

Hattie: "Is that supposed to keep his name a secret?"

Dr. James: "Perhaps, but I gather that it is part of his name."

Hattie: "What is that name?"

Dr. James: "I'm not sure. I heard the name Jackson, but I don't know how 'X' could be part of that name."

Hattie: "Did this 'X' order you to use Zombie on innocent people and use them to commit robberies?"

Dr. James: "Yes."

Hattie: "Why did you choose the individuals that you drugged?"

Dr. James: "We left that up to Colbert."

Hattie: "Who is Colbert?"

Dr. James: "He works at 'Stokes'. He is a bartender."

Hattie: "But why were these particular individuals chosen?"

Dr. James: "It was a random selection."

Hattie: "Why did you consent to go along with this criminal activity?"

Dr. James: "I had large gambling debts. 'X' picked up my paper and threatened me. Then he promised large payments if the drug worked as he wanted."\*/

Hattie turned off the recorder at this point.

Lois and Clark were both mulling the name over for a time.

Lois asked, "Clark, where have we heard that name before?"

"How do we get 'X' out of Jackson?"

Lois snapped her fingers and said, "Wait a minute, what if it isn't spelled J a c k s o n? What if it just sounds like that. Remember, years ago — Jackson spelled J a x o n, as in Jaxon Xavier?"

Clark was stunned at the thought. "Yeah, but didn't he die?"

"No, he didn't. He was still breathing on his own, remember? I think they put him into a care facility so that they could feed him through a tube. What if he recovered?"

"But his higher brain functions were trapped in the Internet!"

"What if somehow he was able to transfer his mind back into his body?"

"He was trying for world dominion by brainwashing world leaders. He was going to lure them into trying his VR world and while they were in there, brainwash them with a program developed by LexCorp. He lost the program when we escaped from his VR world and took his escape window with us. From the sounds of it, this drug would do the same thing. We need to check up on him."

Hattie was shocked. She said, "You know who might be behind this? Just who is this Jaxon Xavier, anyhow?"

Clark said, "JJ and I can start calling around to see if we can locate where he was taken and if he is still there while you fill Hattie in. Come on JJ, we have a bunch of calls to make."

While Clark and JJ went to the conference room to first identify the possible facilities prior to starting the calls, Lois told Hattie the story.

"It was years ago, before we were married. Perry sent us to check out a new amusement center which was based on Virtual

Reality.”

“Oh, you mean like a FPS where you are, like, really in there? JJ and I play them sometimes. When we team up we usually win.”

“Something like that, but on steroids. When you put on these hoods and gloves you were like, really in this Virtual world. I really felt it when we kissed. When we arrived, it apparently threw a monkey wrench into his plans; you see, I was supposed to be alone. Anyhow, the point was that it was all a setup. Jaxon Xavier Luthor was the illegitimate son of Lex Luthor. A young son that everyone thought had died in a car crash with his mother. He was trying to get into the protected archives of the computer system of what used to be LexCorp ...”

Hattie interrupted, “That fits! MiraLabs used to be LexLabs and whoever is behind this has worked to buy a controlling interest.”

“Right! The thing is, he trapped me in the virtual world and kicked Clark out. He didn’t know it, but we knew we were still in the virtual world because Clark didn’t have his powers and there was another Superman that acted kinda ... aloof, if you know what I mean. He thought that we were still fooled. Apparently he was attracted to me and he created this monstrous persona of a man with a big ‘X’ tattooed on his chest. After Clark was kicked out, he confronted Jaxon and Jaxon threatened to trap me in the matrix forever. That’s when Superman went for help. He went to the only person he could think of to help, JJ’s dad. Jimmy, senior quickly built a powerful computer and tied into the VR complex’s matrix and they entered the virtual world. While they were working on getting in, Jaxon changed his VR persona to become Clark. He tricked me into giving him three names that Luthor wanted to use for his children. Those were three of the four words in the passcode to unlock the protected archive where the mind control software was stored. Anyhow, that was when Superman and Jimmy showed up. They figured out what he used as his escape window and we got out. He was still hooked in and when he lost, he crashed the system. His higher brain functions were trapped in the matrix and I guess eventually, the Internet.”

Hattie was fascinated with the story and when Lois paused she asked, “If his higher functions were trapped, how could he possibly still be alive?”

“That’s exactly what we have to figure out. Let’s see how the boys are doing.”

Exiting the office, Lois headed for the conference room while Hattie headed for JJ’s desk. As she approached he shouted, “Got it!”

Clark and Lois both came out of the conference room and approached JJ’s desk. Once they were there he said, “Would you believe that there is still a facility in this city that carries the name ‘Luthor’? Well, there is. Luthor Perpetual Care Center. It is a nursing home. It appears that until about a year and a half ago, Jaxon was an inmate. One day, he suddenly just woke up.”

Lois said, “Let’s go! We have to go there and find out what happened.”

They all went down and piled into Lois’ car and drove to the Luthor Perpetual Care Center. After they entered they inquired about who was present when Jaxon Xavier woke up. Records were checked and the individual was called to the lobby.

Lois read her nametag and was surprised to see that she didn’t have R.N. after her name. Instead she had R.E.E.G.T. It read: Donna King, R.E.E.G.T.

Lois addressed her. “Ms. King, I’m curious, you’re not an RN?”

She smiled and said, “Yeah, I’m asked that a lot. No, I’m not a nurse. There are many things that are done here other than nursing duties. There are certain individuals who, because of their condition, require different diagnostics to be run. My specialty is brain waves. I am a Registered Electroencephalography Technologist. I use an EEG machine to measure the activity in

the brain.”

Lois said, “That’s very interesting. We are here to inquire about what happened to a patient of yours. We were told that you were with him when he woke up. His name was Jaxon Xavier.”

“Oh, wow, yeah. I have good reason to remember that day. Actually, there are a couple. First, it was the first day I had my new machine.”

Hattie asked, “New machine?”

“Yeah, would you like to see it?”

Clark said, “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“Right this way.” She led the way down a couple of hallways and into a room with a bed next to a wire harness in the wall. Above the bed was a light and in the wall near the wire harness was a window.

She led them into an adjoining room, which put them behind the window. Against the wall was a device with various wire leads that went to a wire harness in the wall. Proudly she said, “This is it, the latest thing in the field, detects even the slightest activity.” She pointed through the window. “The patient lies on the bed and I apply the electrodes. Depending on the type of test and how sensitive it needs to be we could use the mesh.” She picked up what looked like a rubber band skull cap with electrical connections and held it up for display. “Sometimes I have to actually glue the electrodes to the scalp. In extreme cases, there are electrodes that are inserted into the nasal cavity and into the nasal sinus.”

Hattie made a face and said, “Sounds painful.”

She replied, “Believe it or not, there is little to no pain involved.”

JJ said, “That’s very interesting, but what about the day that Xavier woke up?”

“Oh, yes, well, as I said that day was memorable for a couple of reasons.” She reached out and lovingly patted her machine and said, “I had just gotten this baby. He was my first patient on it. I had been directed not to use the mesh so I had glued all of the electrodes on and had inserted the nasal-pharyngeal leads. I returned here and turned on the machine. A few seconds later, he woke up. It was quite a surprise, I can tell you. After all of these years to suddenly have him wake up.”

“What did he do when he woke up?”

She thought for a few seconds as she searched her memory. “He coughed a couple of times. He ... he reached up and removed the nasal-pharyngeal leads and looked at them with a curious attitude. And then asked, ‘Where am I?’”

“I immediately hit the panic button to summon help. I had never needed that before. The nursing staff was surprised to get a call from EEG. They almost ignored it thinking I had hit it by accident. When they finally arrived, they were shocked to see him awake. I removed my electrodes and they wheeled him out. I never saw him again.”

Lois muttered, “That makes no sense. Why would that time be any different than any other?”

Hattie asked, “You said that he was your first patient on this machine. What is different about this machine from the one you had before?”

“Well, the doctors were getting tired of looking at paper tracings and going through what seemed like miles and miles of paper for a single record. They wanted the tracing sent directly to their workstations, electronically, so we got this baby. It is networked so that the doctors can connect directly to it and see the tracing in real time if they want to.”

JJ almost shouted, “That’s it! Networked!” He challenged, “The doctor’s computers are on the Internet, aren’t they?”

“Of course!” She looked around to make sure there was no one around. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve entered one of their offices and found them surfing the porn sites. Naturally they excuse it by saying that they are studying anatomy. Yeah, right. Give me a major break.”

JJ said, “There’s the link! His higher functions were trapped in the Net. The EEG device is linked to the doctor’s computer, which in turn is on the Net. He found a way to return to his body.”

Hattie asked, “What happened to him then?”

“Well, like I said, I never saw him again. There were some rumors that he disappeared, but if he did, he had to have help. After so many years of inactivity his muscles were mostly atrophied. He also squinted a lot. After years of having his eyes closed they were extremely sensitive to light.”

Clark said, “Thanks, Ms. King, you’ve been very helpful.” To the rest he said, “Let’s go.”

The four of them headed for Lois’ car to return to the Planet. When they were in the car, Clark said, “Okay, now we have a direction to travel. We have to start looking for where he is getting his money. It is possible that while he was in the matrix he diverted money to accounts or perhaps got account numbers so that he could access some of Luthor’s hidden Swiss accounts. We have to find companies that specialize in the kind of equipment he would need for his continued support. She said that his eyes were sensitive to the light, so he is either in a building with the windows blocked or else underground. My bet would be underground. Lois, you remember Lex’s penchant for going underground.”

“Do I ever!”

Hattie asked, “Why does it always have to be underground? I almost got blown up, underground.”

JJ said, “Look at it this way, at least if you fall, you aren’t falling twenty stories or more.”

“Yeah, like that hasn’t happened before.”

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## Chapter 11 — Jaxon

April 9, 2029

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When they returned to the Planet, Lois and Clark had to return to their office. They had actually been gone longer than they should have been, but this had been too important and they had a personal stake in this particular issue. Now that Hattie and JJ had something to go on, they would take the ball and run with it.

Accordingly, the first thing they did was call Sean. “Sean, Hattie! ... Hi yourself, cousin! I like the sound of that, cousin. Really fits. Just rolls off the tongue easily. ... Yeah, actually there is a purpose for the call other than to pass the time of day. Here’s the situation, I need to know what kind of supplies an individual that has been bedbound for,” she did a quick calculation, “a little over thirty years would need. ... Yeah, just stuck in bed, being fed by a tube, but breathing on their own.” She started taking notes as he dictated, “Uh huh, ... yeah, got that. ... Okay. ... Yeah. I think I got it all. Thanks, cousin. Yeah, it’s about the guy that’s been trying to kill us. ... Yeah, he’s in for a little surprise if he tries again. We’ll let you know. Talk to ya later.”

She called JJ over and said, “Okay, here’s what Sean said to look for. A lot of these would be one-time purchases, but some of them would be ongoing. First and most importantly, he would need a power chair. After thirty years of inactivity he would have significant muscular atrophy. He probably wouldn’t even be able to lift his own weight so he would need staff. He would need high energy, low residue, low fiber foods.”

JJ observed, “That would be just one step up from what he was receiving through a feeding tube.” After thinking for a second he added, “In all probability he would need an adjustable bed like they have in hospitals. That would be available through a medical supply store.”

Hattie offered, “From what Aunt Lois told me the guy is a genius and is a computer geek so he would have purchased, if not readymade systems, at least components. With the advances made in the last thirty years, he probably just bought off-the-

shelf, prebuilt equipment.”

JJ summed it all up. “Okay, so we start looking around the time that he woke up for power chair sales and hospital beds. We have to see where they were delivered.”

“I’ll check on computers and equipment like that. The one item that won’t be past research will be his ongoing need of special foods. He has to be on a special diet because of the time he was restricted to the bed. We need to see if we can locate supply houses and follow up on deliveries. Okay, let’s get to work,” JJ suggested.

Hattie said, “Why don’t you take the power chair and computer equipment and I’ll take the bed and food. We can check back together when we have something.”

“Sounds good to me, wife. You know, I like the sound of that ... Wife. It suits you.”

Hattie smiled in reply, then said, “I like the sound of it too, but right now we have a job to do. Let’s get to work.”

He gave her a quick peck on the cheek and said, “You’re the prettiest slave driver I ever met.”

Three hours later they got together with Lois and Clark in the conference room.

Lois asked, “What have you found out so far?”

“In a city the size of Metropolis the number of power chairs purchased in one week is staggering! I took the date that he woke up and canvassed the sellers of those devices. For the most part they have been accounted for. There are a few that I still need to check back on, there are a few on the list that have passed away in the interim and there are three that are still unaccounted for,” reported JJ.

“I looked into the hospital beds. Same as what JJ said. There are an unbelievable number of hospital beds sold in one week. I have a few to check back on.”

Clark suggested, “I think you should cross reference your lists. See if some of yours cancel out JJ’s.”

“Good idea. We’ll do that.”

“What about the food angle?” Lois asked.

“I wish we had a better handle on that diet. I’ve started checking around, calling home hospital supply houses. I found that the foods can come from the same places as the beds. Unfortunately, since the foods aren’t so bulky, they could be picked up and not have to be delivered. That looks like a dead end,” Hattie reported.

“I’ve also been checking on the stock purchases of MiraLabs. That leads to a trust. The money is coming from a numbered Swiss account. It could be some of the money that Luthor had squirreled away. Funds from that same account were used to purchase a ton of computer equipment. It was all delivered to an old warehouse that used to belong to LexCorp.”

Hearing this, Hattie started getting excited. “Where is this warehouse?” she asked anxiously.

“Down by the docks, why?”

“One of the beds was delivered to a warehouse down by the docks. I didn’t think much of it until now. I thought it was just being put into storage.”

“I need to go back and check my power chair list. I might have missed something. Back in a flash,” JJ said.

Lois cautioned, “Be careful that no one sees anything.”

“I only meant it as a figure of speech, Aunt Lois. Gee, give me a little credit,” he said in a slightly offended tone.

“Sorry,” said Lois, “I only meant it as a friendly reminder.”

In a mollified tone he said, “Sorry, I guess I was being a little touchy.” He left the conference room and retrieved a sheet of paper he had been working on. When he returned he said, “Sure enough. I did miss something. Here’s a power chair going to that same warehouse.”

“Keep at it, you two. Sounds like you are narrowing it down,” Clark commended.

“Narrowing it down? I’d say that it looks like that warehouse

could be his location. Look, it would fit our criteria. Everything on one floor so that he could get around on the power chair. No windows so subdued lighting could be maintained. Easy access for support staff with no questions asked. Who would question workers in a warehouse? Large doors or a loading dock for bringing in lots of equipment. It would be the perfect set up,” Hattie said enthusiastically.

“Okay, seems likely; now, how do you first, convince the police that he is the one behind all of this and second, convince them that this warehouse is his hideout?” Lois challenged.

JJ offered, “I could do a flyover and use my x-ray vision to see if he’s there.”

Clark smiled and said, “Now you’re starting to think like a true superhero. Way to go,” then he clapped him on the back.

JJ headed for the stairwell, loosening his tie as he went.

In a musing tone, Hattie said, “You know, I’ve seen Uncle Clark do that so many times ... In the last year, ever since Jon and Jen brought me in on the family secret ... now I know why ... Now, to see my husband, JJ, do it, it sends a thrill up my spine.”

Lois smiled and said in a wistful tone, “I saw the same thing and for the longest time I couldn’t figure it out. He was doing it right there in front of me and I didn’t tumble to what was going on. Some investigative reporter I was. The biggest story of the century and I missed it.” She snickered and continued, “I can’t tell you how mad I was when I did finally figure it out and how happy I was when we finally resolved our relationship. One of the happiest days of my life was the day we got married. There have been many more since that day.”

“It is a thrill to think, ‘There he goes. He’s a superhero and he’s mine.’” Hattie offered.

“Yeah, I know exactly how you feel. Until I got the pendant all I could do was watch as he left. I had a taste of it when I was Ultra Woman that first time. It’s still a thrill, realizing that Superman is \*my\* man.”

Seeing JJ exit the stairwell again and head their way, Hattie said, “That didn’t take long at all. I wonder what happened.”

JJ walked in and said, “No luck. I couldn’t see anything.”

Clark chuckled and said, “Believe it or not, that could be a sign that you are on the right track.”

Lois added, “Yeah, that means that they either lined the building with lead or used lead-based paint in an attempt to hide what they are doing from the superheroes.”

Hattie said, “I think I’m ready for a break. Let’s go get some lunch.”

JJ replied with a question. “Lunch or a nooner?”

Hattie blushed and swatted his arm. “Much more of that and one of us will be using the other bedroom.”

JJ was shocked. “Really? You’d do that?”

“Well, no, not really. Just don’t say things like that in front of Uncle Clark and Aunt Lois, okay?”

Lois chimed in, “Hattie girl, don’t worry about it. I can’t tell you the number of times we did that.”

“Oh, I knew you would understand, it’s just talking about it, right here in front of you guys. It’s a little embarrassing.”

Lois pulled Hattie aside and asked, “Are you using the telepathy when you join?”

Hattie nodded. “It’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced before in my life.”

Lois smiled, “It adds an entirely new dimension to the act. Gives a whole new meaning to the word togetherness, doesn’t it?”

Hattie nodded her head enthusiastically.

Lois said, “Go on and have lunch or whatever. We’ll see you when you get back.”

Hattie and JJ walked out of the conference room and back to their desks. Hattie picked up her ‘bag of tricks’ and they headed out to lunch. As they got into the elevator, Hattie said, “Because

of your comment, we are going to lunch, only.” She said the last word with emphasis.

JJ put on a mock-disappointed face and said, “You know that we really don’t need as much in the way of food now, don’t you? We derive a lot of our energy directly from the sun.”

“Yeah, I know that, but I like to eat. I enjoy the taste.”

They exited the elevator and headed out of the building. Turning right, they headed for Hank’s.

They had only gone a dozen paces when a cab pulled up to the curb slightly ahead of them. They didn’t think anything of it as they continued walking. As they came abreast of the cab a man stepped onto the sidewalk from an alley on the right, opposite the cab, and he had a hand in his pocket. When Hattie perceived his presence, faster than the eye could follow, she dipped her hand into her bag, extracted her mini-recorder, turned it on to record and dropped it into her pocket. The thug said, “Get into the cab and don’t try any of your karate stuff. I have a gun and so does the driver. There’s also another gun on you from back in the alley.”

They entered the cab and the gunman got in front, next to the driver, who started the cab and pulled into traffic.

JJ asked, “What’s this all about?”

“The Boss wants to find out how much you know.”

Hattie thought about Lois and sent, “We are being kidnapped. They say that the Boss wants to find out what we know. This may be the payoff. In view of what happened before, maybe JJ’s dad could be a key player.”

Lois sent back, “You could be right. We’ll collect him and be nearby when needed.”

She sent to JJ, “The cavalry is on the way.”

They both sat quietly while the cab took them to the harbor area. When they arrived they were ushered from the cab and into a warehouse, the same one that they had identified as being the most likely location for Jaxon Xavier.

Hattie’s bag was taken from her, but they were not frisked. They were taken at gunpoint to a darkened room. Once they entered, a light was turned on. It was like a spotlight and it was directed right at them. Instinctively they each brought up their hands to shield their eyes. As a result they couldn’t see into the darkened area and their glasses blocked their x-ray vision.

A voice that sounded as if it were coming from an old and enfeebled man came from the darkness. “Just how much have you found out about me?”

Hattie asked, “Is that Mr. Jaxon Xavier speaking?”

A female voice filled the room. “She’s got you there, bright boy. Now what are you going to do?”

“Shut up! I didn’t ask for you to comment. How did you discover Zombie?”

“You were careless.”

“How much of what you know have you told Lois Lane and Clark Kent?”

“Well, you see, they are our bosses, so we have told them everything. They know that you were behind Zombie. That you own the controlling shares of MiraLabs, that you were behind the corporate espionage using Metro-Staff. Need I go on?”

Slowly they had acclimated to the light and with their supervision watched as Jaxon donned an odd helmet. He adjusted a split keyboard in front of him and started hitting keys. Suddenly, he appeared on a monitor behind the lights and his voice came from a set of speakers, strong and youthful. “You have been a thorn in my side from day one.” His appearance was that of a twenty-something guy, small of stature with curly black hair reminiscent of pictures they had seen of Lex Luthor.

“If I’d had more time I’d have set up some more stations and then you would have joined me in my world!” His image on the monitor spread its hands to indicate the surroundings. Suddenly his image morphed into that of a muscular giant. Along with the change in appearance his voice got lower and more gruff, “Then I

would have dealt with you myself. If you had died in here, your body would have died also, but since I can't deal with you myself my associates will have to do it for me. Kill them!"

Not unexpectedly, in response to this order there was a burst of gunfire from the shadows behind the lights. The impact of the bullets knocked Hattie and JJ down and into the shadows, or at least it looked like the impact of the bullets did that.

As the echoes of the gunfire faded away, the door was burst open and Superman came in with Ultra Woman. They disarmed the gunmen. As this was happening, Jaxon was shouting, through the speakers, "What are you doing here? How did you find me?" Don't come a step closer. I'll disappear into the net again."

Just then Jimmy Olsen entered the room. He said, "I wouldn't if I were you. You won't be going anywhere. I pulled the plug on your modem. You are off the Net. If you try to disconnect, you will simply be trapped in the hard drive."

An anguished tone squawked from the speakers. "Nooooooooooooo!" As they watched, the hulking brute on the monitor morphed back into Jaxon Xavier as he had looked thirty years earlier.

Jimmy replied, "Yes! You may have been a genius and very advanced in computer technology, but we've made a lot of advancements in thirty years. With every system, there's usually an unavoidable single point of failure, the single connection to the Internet. Pull that plug and you have to rely on your own resources. You have two choices, one, come out of there and face the music or two, stay in that world you created and replay the few scenarios you've had time to build for as long as the power lasts, which alone could drive you crazy. If you disconnect, I'll personally pull the power plug, rip out the hard drive and run a drill through the case so that it will never spin up again."

"You wouldn't!" Jaxon challenged.

"Try me," Jimmy threatened.

"But you're with them!"

"Yes, I'm with them, but not one of them. I don't live by their superhero code of ethics," Jimmy replied calmly.

"At least I've had my revenge. Those two are dead," Xavier said with a smirk.

Just as he finished speaking, Hattie and JJ stepped into the light. Hattie said, "I wouldn't go so far as to say that."

Jaxon sputtered, "How?"

JJ said, "Ever since that sniper attempt we have both been wearing bulletproof vests." Opening his shirt, he displayed the blue vest. "That's what saved us the night before our wedding."

Jimmy asked, "What's it going to be, Jaxon? Do we take your mindless body back to the nursing home while I destroy your mind stored on that hard drive or do you take your chances in the courts?"

"Well, it'll be my word against theirs. My thugs will not remember anything when the drug wears off." Suddenly the screen went blank, Jaxon's body shook. He reached up and removed the helmet and then removed his strange gloves. JJ stepped over and moved the helmet out of his reach. He said, "Do you want to tell him now, Hattie?"

Hattie smiled and said, "When your bully boys picked us up, I had my recorder in my pocket. I was able to record every word said. She rewound the tape and hit play. Out of the speaker blasted, "Then I would have dealt with you myself, but since I can't my associates will have to do it for me. Kill them!"

Forgetting the enfeebled state of his body, Jaxon suddenly lurched up and tried to spring at Hattie, but his strength failed him and he toppled forward. As he fell his head hit the corner of his desk. His constitution was so weakened from thirty years of inactivity that he was dead before he hit the floor.

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Back in the office they were all gathered in the conference room.

Lois said, "Such a shame. There was just nothing we could

do for him. Jimmy, would you really have done that to him?"

"Nah, it was all a bluff. I mean, I could have done that and he knew it, but I wouldn't have. Oh, I would have kept him off the net and isolated, but I would have left him active. That was a solid-state drive so there were no moving parts to wear out. As long as the system had power he could have existed. I might have tried to program some new scenarios for him so that he wouldn't go stir crazy, although I think he was already crazy. You know what they say, that there is a very fine line between genius and insanity."

Hattie said, "I'm sort of sorry it turned out this way, but at least now I won't be wearing a target on my back."

Lois laughed and said, "You mean, until the next time." She gave Hattie a hug as she finished. "With you and me, Hattie girl, there'll \*always\* be a \*next time\*."

THE END