



by Chris Dee

Giovanni d'Annunzio looked down at his reservation chart, then up at the couple before him. The leggy brunette said she was lunching with Bruce Wayne. The wiry man with thinning hair and a question mark tie clip said he was meeting Selina Kyle. Giovanni looked back at his seating chart: There was only one table. Wayne's man Pennyworth made the reservation for one o'clock, a party of two. Selina called a few minutes later: one o'clock, a party of two. He just assumed they were together. He promised them both his best table.

The only free space for emergencies such as this was cramped and noisy, near the kitchen. He could not risk insulting Bruce Wayne, accustomed to the best d'Annunzio's had to offer. Nor would he want to offend Selina, who brought royalty to his establishment in the person of that oddly dressed Princess of Themyscira... Selina who had been so gracious when he'd seated that awful Miller character... Selina who, on seeing the vilifying writers in her territory, had spoken about vendetta (in flawless, patrician Italian) in terms that made it clear, Catwoman or no, this was not a woman to cross.

He decided the only solution was to compound his mistake. He had assumed the two different reservations were the same. What if, instead, he had assumed the two parties would be dining together? Still an innocent misunderstanding on his part, but this way, no one should be offended by being seated at a cramped table by the kitchen.

He picked up two menus and beckoned Bruce and Selina's guests to follow him.



Zatanna sat across from her unexpected lunch companion, concealing her suspicions in the easy manner of a show-biz personality on a talk show. That Bruce was late was not, in itself, cause for alarm. He was a busy man with a company to run, a charitable foundation gearing up for the holidays, and a secret identity. So he was late for a lunch date. Big deal. What was suspicious was that a criminal sat in his place. The man with the question mark tie clip was not unknown to Zatanna. As an auxiliary member of the JLA, she would have recognized The Riddler even if he hadn't introduced himself, bold as brass, as Edward Nigma.

"So tell me," the insidious puzzle master queried, "What brings the famous prestidigitatress to Gotham City?"

It took Zatanna a half-minute to realize this was meant as polite smalltalk, not a master criminal issuing a riddling challenge, and she found herself answering reflexively as she would on a talk show: "I'm playing at the Civic Center on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, and then I have a special appearance at the Wayne Foundation Gala to benefit the Thomas Wayne Memorial Clinic. It's always such a pleasure coming into Gotham for any reason, but I'm especially excited to be a part of this event. There's to be a silent auction, and one of the items being sold is an artifact of Harry Houdini's. The Tome—"

"The Tome of Secrets," Nigma cut her off. And only then did Zatanna remember she was not speaking to a talk show host, but a member of Batman's Rogues Gallery, a theme criminal, and she had just drawn his attention to a most tempting prize. Bruce arrived then, followed by Selina, both complaining about the same traffic snarl in Gotham Plaza. By the time they sorted out the introductions and lunch orders,

Zatanna had tried twice to signal Bruce about her faux pas. It now became clear that no such covert signals were necessary, for Nigma introduced the subject openly.

"Before you two arrived, Miss Zatanna had just mentioned an item I'm very interested in, Harry Houdini's Tome of Secrets. It's said to contain every secret he knew, his own illusions and escapes, those of other magicians, the fake mystics he debunked, everything."

Zatanna began envisioning the bat-squint and lengthy explanations as to how and why she'd told a master criminal about such a coveted prize. But as Nigma went on, it became clear he already knew about the Tome long before their conversation:

"When he died, Houdini told his brother Theo to burn the thing. But he wouldn't. Instead, Theo used the Tome's secrets to further his own act – and therein, so the legend says, began the curse."

"The curse?" Bruce and Selina asked in unison, causing Zatanna to look back and forth across the table like she was watching a tennis match.

"The curse," Nigma repeated. "If any but the rightful owner of the Tome turns its pages," he lowered his voice dramatically as if telling children on a camping trip about the escaped maniac with a hook for a hand, "it is his or her own secret that will be revealed to the world."



"Let me get this straight," Bruce asked, walking Zatanna out of the restaurant, "You're doing two shows at the Civic Center for extra money to buy this magic book..."

"The Houdini Tome," Zatanna corrected, waving her arm for a cab.

"...but if you get outbid, you won't let me buy it for you and you won't let me lend you money?"

"Curses are not to be trifled with, Bruce. Riddleman had it right. If any but the rightful owner touches the thing, their secrets will be outed. I don't know exactly how the powers that be might interpret 'the rightful owner'..."



"...and I'm not any taking chances," Eddie told Selina, "I can't steal it. I have to buy the Tome legitimately."

Selina sipped her coffee while Eddie finished his dessert.

"Good thing you asked me to lunch today, because I found out who my competition is. Zatanna is in town for the book, she said so! That woman is a professional magician, there's no telling what tricks she might stoop to in order to get it. I'm going to have to play hardball; I can see that. Something to deplete her cash reserves and boost my own."

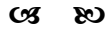
"Eddie, you're unbelievable. You chance into having lunch with a beautiful, unattached woman, and in the ten minutes you were alone together, you make her into a rival. You had stuff in common!"

"You saying this was a fix up?"

"It was not a fix up, Eddie. It was just an oops at the reservation desk, I swear. But look, I was at a bridal shower with Zatanna. In a room full of bitchy, tightass,

pretentious crosscurrents, she was the let-your-hair-down, live-and-let-live, top-up-the-champagne-glasses and joke-about-toys-that-go-whirr girl. You hear what I'm saying? You found out you had stuff in common, right? She's a magician, she knows about Houdini."

"Lina, look, I do hear you. But no. I'm done with it; I'm off women for a while. No offense. Between Harley and Doris and Clurissa and Ivy, *it's been a bad year*. Enough already. I'm going back to focusing on the work—and getting that book. By any means necessary."



"IXAT POTS," Zatanna called out in desperation, causing a passing cab to screech to a halt, stopping within inches of her outstretched leg. "Works every time," she winked while Bruce held the door.

As the taxi disappeared into traffic, Bruce returned to the restaurant with a scowl.

He waited for Nigma to depart and offered Selina a ride home.

"They're both awfully intense about Houdini," he muttered, while they waited for the valet to bring the Jag.

"*-cough-SherlockHolmes-cough-*" she answered, with a graceful dip into the passenger seat.

Bruce couldn't help but smile at the valet's double take. He was grateful in ways he couldn't even articulate that it was Selina, that it was Catwoman, who was the woman in his life. He didn't have to be polite on the ride home. He didn't need to be politically correct or even tactful. He could vent.

Zatanna was a nice girl and a heroine, but in some ways, she epitomized everything he distrusted about metas and superpowers. Using magic to hail a cab. Irresponsible. Flamboyant. Heedless. Careless.

The best of them relied on their powers too much and never developed other basic skills as they should. "Powers are not a crutch," Wonder Woman had insisted on the one time he broached the subject, "They're a part of us, a part of what makes us all that we are. Why, it's like saying you're too dependent on your eyesight because you never learned to read Braille."

"I can read Braille," Batman had said flatly. "It comes in handy."

Diana had stormed off in search of a listener that wouldn't contradict her proclamations. By contrast, Selina was nodding at the story as he told it, smiling like it never occurred to her for a moment that Batman would not read Braille.

Zatanna, he resumed, was the perfect illustration of what he was saying. She was the weak link of any team she was on, when one would think her magic would make her the strongest.

"Proving yet again," Selina purred, shifting her legs subtly in the seat, "it's not powers or the lack, it's what you do with them."

A twitch-smile signaled that Bruce was done venting and, noting the seductive shift of her legs, he proposed bypassing her apartment and heading out to the manor. She shook her head.

"No point, we'll just get settled in and you'll wind up coming straight back into town."

“Oh?” Bruce’s eyes flickered off the road to regard her. With Silver or a bimbo that statement would be a complaint, because he was always running off from their dates. Coming from Selina, it was a tease. She knew something. She knew Batman would be called into the city tonight—and she’d just spoken with Nigma.

“No need to come back just for that,” Bruce began, dipping his voice slightly into Batman’s gravel to show he was ahead of her. “Since I already know the answer to the riddle is Houdini.”

She said nothing, but his peripheral detected a sad shake of the head.

“Oh right, the rightful owner bit. Damn.”

His eyes shifted stealing a peek. There was still no reaction from Selina.

“Well, if Nigma is planning to buy it outright and he just found out he’s got competition, he’ll be going for large amounts of cash. Like box office receipts. And if he hit Zatanna’s shows, that could tie her up in paperwork, delay her payment, reducing her ability to bid against him.”

He twitched. Selina said nothing. This triumph of deduction was as much a foregone conclusion as Batman knowing how to read Braille...

“Damn, you’re a hard woman to impress.”

She laughed.

“I like watching you show off.”

“I wasn’t showing off,” Bruce lied, “just thinking out loud.”



**Gotham Times, December 8**

LIFESTYLES

*Hermine's Society Chit-Chat*

Only one party into the season, it's far too early to declare a Deb of the Year. Nevertheless, Miss Cecily Grenville certainly distinguished herself last night, exhibiting poise under pressure that is the hallmark of true character. The Snowflake Ball was the scene of an attack by Mr. Freeze [see Local News, p.2]. When costumed vigilantes arrived on the scene, Miss Grenville was taken hostage, and although the dastardly villain was apprehended, Miss Grenville was left with her foot frozen in a block of ice. Rather than leave in hysterics, Miss Grenville comported herself as a true lady, remaining at her table with her foot soaking in a tub of defrost solution, chatting with her escort, Mr. Timothy Drake...

::Twitterbringgggg::

"Hello? Yes, Dick, I saw the bit in the paper. You're the fourth person to call and ask... No, I'm not in deep shit with Steph. We're not exclusive. We never said we were exclusive... She patrols with Robin, that's all. That's as far as it goes... What do you mean 'I'll Learn.' Bro, I'm telling you, it's not a big deal..."



**Gotham Times, December 8**

CLASSIFIEDS

Lost: At or in the vicinity of Beaton's Tearoom, a shopping bag containing four small gift-wrapped parcels and a bound manuscript. Owner does not care about parcels. Reward for return of manuscript.

::Twitterbringgggg::

"Wayne Manor... Yes, Madame, the manuscript is a work of fiction... That is most reassuring. Thank you very much. For confirmation purposes, could you read me the title page, please?... Yes, indeed, that's it... Yes, a-hem, it is a play... Yes, indeed, I am the playwright... I am most flattered, Madame, but there are no plans for production in the foreseeable future. I only wish the manuscript returned... Yes, please address it to Pennyworth, P-E-N-N-Y..."



**Gotham Times, December 8**

LOCAL NEWS

The show at the Gotham Civic Center, *Zatanna: Mistress of Magic*, was interrupted last night when the performer vanished from the stage. According to eyewitnesses, Zatanna became distracted by a disruption in the rear of the auditorium. She muttered something the witnesses could not understand, then disappeared "in the blink of an eye." In what appeared to be a variation of Houdini's Metamorphosis, a figure draped in black cloth materialized at the same instant on the spot where she had vanished. The cloth fell, revealing the costumed criminal known as The Riddler bound in handcuffs.

The audience, assuming this was part of the show, applauded and cheered as the felon ran offstage and escaped via the stagedoor.

Minutes later, the plucky Zatanna returned to the stage from the back of the auditorium and finished the performance.

Audience members say they only realized what had occurred when they left the theatre to discover police tape and flashing lights in the parking lot.

Authorities will not confirm that The Batman foiled a robbery of the Civic Center Box Office during the show.

::Twitterbringgggg::

“Hey Selina, it’s Eddie. Thought you’d want to know, Bats has come up with a new kind of Batcuff, damn thing took me twenty minutes to get out of last night. Good thing I got away and had plenty of time to work on it. I figured since you always worked out how to quick-pick all the previous versions, you’ll want to take this new one apart. You’ve got to see this thing, it’s really hard to open!... Anyway, you’re now officially the only woman left I will keep in touch with - and that’s only because you’re dating Wayne and can’t get any ideas. Would you believe HARLEY called me after that bit in the paper? Said she was real concerned about ‘this thing’ with me and Zatanna, that I was on the rebound from Ivy and shouldn’t do anything rash! Can you believe that!!! ME on the REBOUND from IVY??? I dumped her! If you can call it dumping when it was just a one-night stand and a green one at that... and what ‘thing with me and Zatanna,’ huh? It was a robbery, not a thing. A robbery is not a thing! Do we all have to pair up like animals in the ark now? Can’t anybody just put on a mask and commit a freaking crime anymore?... This is all your fault, Selina, you and you-know-who, because people in this town used to be able to tell the difference between a crime and... Hello? Selina? Aw shit.”

::Twitterbringgggg::

“Allo. Diz is Kittlemeier.... Yez, Mr. B. I been expecting your calls. A new zet of ze batcuffz, yez, I zee dat in ze papers... A replazement cape too? Oh my, izzat ze black cloth dat wind up on ze ztage? ... Oh my. Ok. Zo batcuffz, and cape. You pay when you pick up, usual time...”

::Twitterbringgggg::

“Don’t hang up! Okay, I broke a rule. I take it back. ‘There is not now nor has there ever been anything between Catwoman and Batman, and anybody who says otherwise in the feline presence will be like unto the ball of yarn.’ OK? I’ve done penance. Give me a break, Selina, it was a helluva night. And the very thought of Miss Top Hat and Fishnets as a prospective romance... Do you know what she did to me? ‘Tca eht ni thguac,’ how do you like that! I make up anagrams in my sleep, Selina, you think I didn’t recognize that as ‘caught in the act’? And then I’m up on the stage – which, okay, it worked out for me, ‘cause I had a little oops with Batman in the box office, and winding up on stage made for an easy getaway, but c’mon, CAUGHT IN THE ACT! It’s a freakin’ pun! What are we back to Robin I, Punning Punster of Gotham?”



**Gotham Times, December 8**

PERSONALS

Successful Gotham entrepreneur with thriving nightclub seeks vivacious female companion. Birdwatching a plus.



**Gotham Times, December 8**

ABOUT TOWN

Tis the season for every charity in creation to hold a fundraiser, and everyone's calendar is overcrowded. But the upcoming gala to benefit the Thomas Wayne Memorial Clinic is worth making time for. Entertainment includes the Hudson University Choral Singers under the direction of Lori Elton, and *Zatanna: Mistress of Magic*. Silent Auction includes many rare and valuable antiques including a Fabergé egg, a collection of vintage Punch and Judy puppets, a pair of cufflinks that once belonged to Rudolph Valentino, an exquisite etching by the Master of Cologne, and an extraordinary artifact of Harry Houdini's known as the Tome of Secrets.

::Twitterbringgggg::

"Morning, Lucius. It's Bruce. I'm juggling the seating at the benefit, need to free up a chair at my table... A friend of Selina's, he's very interested in the Houdini Tome, so I thought it would be only polite to, you know, keep a close eye on him, I mean, seat him where he can have a good look at it. Is it okay if I move Leslie Thompkins to your table?... Good then. Thanks, Lucius."

::Twitterbringgggg::

"Hello, Edward. This is Bruce Wayne. I thought I remembered you saying something about that Houdily Book you were interested in... That's what I said, isn't it? Houdily... Oh, right, Houdini, yes, of course. Anyway, this Houdini doohickey. It turns out it's actually a Wayne Foundation event that's holding this sale... Hm? Oh, I can never keep track of that. I have someone who manages the schedule. Anyway, the Foundation has three tables, so I made sure you'll be seated with me and Selina... Good, good. Well then, see you there."

::Twitterbringgggg::

"It's me, Kitten. Secure the line... Are we still on for dinner?... Yes, I am in a better mood; I wasn't in a bad mood before... I was not chewing nails... I was not.... Now that's an exaggeration.... I am going to take him down hard, fast, and painful, but to say I'm 'royally pissed' is overstating it... I did not bite Alfred's head off... I did not call Whiskers a demonic little furball... I told Alfred, in a calm and rational tone, not to reposition anything in the costume vault because I'd have the cape replaced by Tuesday, and I made passing reference to the fate of the last cape... Yes, the last cape, the destruction of which your demonic little furball reveled in with wanton glee... I am not... So dinner's off?... Oh, heh. Well that's a thought... Okay, roof of the Moxton Building, midnight... Yeah. Meow."



**Gotham Times, December 8**

VICTORIA'S SECRET CIRCULAR

Ho Ho Ho

Make his Ho-Ho-Holidays Merry with our stunning collection of intimate apparel in reds as red as holly, and blacks as black as coal left in bad little girl's stockings.

::Twitterbringgggg::

"Ha-Ha-Hiya, I mean, eh, hello. This is Dr. Harleen Quinzel, I would like to speak to one of your patients, a Ms. Pamela Isley... Ha-Ha-Hiya, Red! I was just thinkin', since you're up at Arkham and Puddin' is up at Arkham, could you maybe talk to him and see what he might like for Christmas?... But Red!... Red, I don't know what to get him!... Well there's this ad in the paper, but I don't think he'd like prancing around in red silk lingerie... Red? You still there? There was hacking sound... Well, if you won't help me, I'll have ta fall back on a theme gift, there are these Punch 'n' Judy puppets... Red? Red? What's so funny?



The bats always grew still when the roar of the great engine echoed through the cave. Then the dark man emerged from the black car. He emitted an intensity some of the bats could sense and others could not. Those that did became agitated; it felt like a storm brewing.

It had not felt like this for some time.

The dark man was still for a long time, seated amidst the flashing boxes and lights.

Then he rose and moved into the room with the towering perches...



Batman moved like a ghost among the trophies in his trophy room, his cape brushing the bases supporting the largest objects: the dinosaur from Dinosaur Island and the giant penny of Joseph Coyne, the Penny Plunderer. Batman's mouth twitched as he regarded an oversized playing card. Joker assumed his was the largest of Batman's trophies. One day he would have to tell the psychotic clown his contribution fell short by a full four meters.

Batman spent more time studying the smaller items in glass cases: a freeze ray, an exploding question mark, several hats tricked out with microelectronics, a handle of braided leather...

"Meow," he whispered, running a gloved finger over the case. He would miss her. But it was for the best...

He moved beyond these cases to the newest acquisition, propped on a small Lucite stand, Houdini's Tome of Secrets.

"Just you and me, Harry," he remarked, picking up the book and bringing it with him to the costume vault. While he changed into Bruce Wayne's street clothes, he laid the book on the little shelf meant for Catwoman's costume. Hanging it on the peg, she complained, would pull the leather out of shape.

Now the shelf was bare.

He would miss her, certainly. But this was for the best. Hell Month nearly finished them last time.

A few minutes later, he ascended to the manor, Houdini Tome in hand. Alfred greeted him cautiously. It was starting already. January 5<sup>th</sup>, and already everyone on eggshells, like he was a monster.

"Did Wayne-One call?" Bruce asked curtly.

"Yes, sir, about thirty minutes ago. Your private plane landed in Paris at seven a.m. local time. It will refuel and be back at Gotham Executive Airport by three p.m. tomorrow. The pilot reported that Ms. Kyle had a most comfortable flight and, by way of thanks, sent a message which he was reluctant to relay. When I assured him the lady often indulged in a kind of *banter* which expressed affection no matter how insulting it might appear, he relayed it to me to pass on to you."

"Well?" Bruce asked, annoyed. Hell Month or not, this beating around the bush was trying his patience.

"Are you quite sure it was wise to send Miss Selina to Paris for Hell Mon- for these three weeks, sir? It isn't my place to say, of course, but it seems you would both be happier if--"

"It *isn't* your place, Alfred. The message?"

"You are a rigid, humorless, paranoid, obsessive, smug, melodramatic, and pompous jackass, sir."

Bruce glared, then to show he understood this to be the message rather than an egregious impertinence on Alfred's part, he noted:

"Cat Tales, Act I. I'll be in my room, reading."

He gestured with the book and turned to go.

Last night, he'd tried reading in the cave. He preferred the cave this time of year, preferred staying in costume. But there are physical laws that refuse to accommodate the Batman's mood: the book was old and irreplaceable, the cave was damp. So he retired to his bedroom, set a match to the fire laid in the outer room, and opened a small leather box on the sidetable. He selected a CD and heard the opening strains of Schubert's Impromptu #90. He sat and read the notes of the great escape artist, and thought back over how this object came into his possession.



The Robinson Plaza Hotel, on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Robinson Park, always went the extra mile for a Wayne Foundation event. Their Grand Ballroom was not the largest in Gotham, but it was the most sought after in the busy holiday season. When it opened in 1907, the rich entertained in their homes. With the building of the Plaza, they began giving up their city mansions in favor of suites of rooms. The Plaza was built to offer "all the pomp, glory, and opulence of a French chateau," and this it did. The largest single order in history for gold-encrusted china was placed with L. Straus & Sons, and no less than 1,650 crystal chandeliers were purchased. In giving up their townhouses, however, the great hostesses had also given up their ballrooms, and the Plaza became the first establishment to offer, for a price, such facilities that had previously been a function of private entertaining.

With such a history, it was not surprising that everyone with an event in December wanted to book the Plaza's ballroom. That the Wayne Foundation could always secure it for whatever night it pleased was a function not only of Bruce Wayne's standing, but of Alfred's expert management of any event Mr. Wayne booked.

The official reason for Alfred's involvement was snobbery: the waitstaff of a commercial hotel were respectful, if not actually intimidated by, their counterparts in private service. And Alfred Pennyworth was everyone's idea of a British butler: authoritative, witty, snobbish, discreet and intelligent, both respected and feared for his masterful knowledge of etiquette, food, drink, sterling silver and glassware.

The unofficial reason for Alfred's presence was insurance, in case Bruce needed to make a Bat-exit. One couldn't always rely on Lucius, after all. In fact, Bruce reflected sourly that night at the gala, one *usually* couldn't rely on Lucius.

Another burst of merry laughter from Table 2 punctuated the thought. Lucius's table was having a wonderful time. His own gathering at Table 1 was far from cheery.

Selina, sitting next to him, was becoming far too interested in the Riddler-Zatanna duel for the Tome. Yes, Eddie was her friend. But it seemed, somehow, Eddie had also become her horse, and Zatanna his, in one of her twisted games with Batman, and just what the rules of this particular game were he was at a loss to say. He wanted Eddie taken down for the attempted robbery at the Civic Center, but beyond that he had no

interest in who wound up buying a book that was, at best, a curious artifact of interest to a few dozen people worldwide.

Next to Selina was Edward Nigma, alternately eying the book and Zatanna seated seven places away. Bruce's own fault: He'd taken pains to put Nigma at his table so he could keep an eye on him, forgetting that, since Zatanna would be performing, she too would be at the head table.

For her part, Zatanna was ignoring Nigma's existence. When she first sat down, she had made a few remarks about all the plainclothes police on hand to protect the auction treasures. If this was meant to rattle Nigma, Bruce could have told her she was wasting her time. Riddler was one of his smartest foes. He wasn't at the gala to commit a crime but to bid legitimately on an item for sale. And he knew he was in no danger after the incident at the Civic Center. It wasn't common knowledge that Edward Nigma was the Riddler, but even among those who knew, the fact that a person wearing a leotard with a question mark was seen near an *alleged* robbery attempt was not conclusive proof that this man sitting at Table 1 had done anything for which he could be arrested.

Next to Nigma sat Barbara and Dick. Barbara looking none too pleased to be seated next to Riddler; Dick looking none too pleased to see Lori Elton three chairs away. Bruce remembered that Dick and Lori had been a couple for a time in college, but as far as he knew, it was an amicable parting. Why there should be any tension he couldn't imagine.

Between Dick and Lori sat Dinah Lance and Martin Stanwick. Martin was the only one to respond to Zatanna about the security. He said he didn't know why the police even bothered with plainclothes officers. They were so painfully obvious. When Barbara bristled at this, Martin proceeded to point out each and every one of the undercover officers. "Cheap shoes," he pronounced, "off the rack tuxes, and polyblend evening frocks. NOKD GCPD."

Finally, between Lori Elton and Zatanna, sat Dr. Leland Bartholomew. Bartholomew seemed more put out than any at this none-too-cheery gathering. At first, Bruce thought it might be Nigma's presence. Bartholomew was, after all, a doctor at Arkham and had the unfortunate duty of treating the incarcerated rogues as patients. But if Nigma was too anxious about the Tome to care about Bartholomew, Bartholomew too seemed preoccupied, too preoccupied with... something?... to worry about Nigma. After a few minutes observing, Bruce deduced the something: Leslie Thompkins. Bartholomew kept glancing to Leslie at Table 2, then to Zatanna sitting next to him.

Leslie was head of the Thomas Wayne Clinic, the institution this event was to benefit. She would, logically, be at the head table. Bruce had only moved her to Table 2 to make room for Eddie. He made a mental note to confirm later with Lucius, but he was certain what he would find: Dr. Bartholomew had made a large donation to the Foundation and pulled strings to secure a place at this table, assuming he'd be seated with Leslie Thompkins.

Well, well. Bruce determined to make amends.

"Dr. Bartholomew," he began with only a touch of the Fop in his voice, "after dinner, you simply *must* let me introduce you to your colleague, Dr. Thompkins, who runs the clinic."

If there was any doubt of Bartholomew's infatuation with Leslie, his reaction to these words dispelled it. He beamed as he informed Bruce that, while he would be *delighted* to talk with Dr. Thompkins again, no introductions were necessary for, indeed, they had been at med school together. He then proceeded to list every class they'd had in common, from gross anatomy to abnormal psychology.

"Oh dear," Lori Elton laughed sweetly, "Abnormal psychology, that's rather a delicate subject with someone at this table, isn't it Grayson."

It seemed like polite smalltalk, just something to keep the conversation going. But Dick's eyes bulged slightly and he bit his lip.

"Tell, tell," Barbara asked eagerly, a fact-finder hot on the scent.

"When we were in college," Lori answered readily, "I remember Dick was flunking abnormal psych—"

"He what?" Bruce interjected, transformed in an instant from fop to father.

"—ology," Lori continued.

"Ix-nay, ix-nay," Dick pleaded too late.

"Failing abnormal psychology?" Bruce asked flatly.

"I can explain," Dick insisted, no longer a grown man but a college freshman with some explaining to do to the man paying his tuition.

"And it was the biggest secret because there were some classes - I remember chemistry was another one - he was simply *NOT ALLOWED* to not ace."

Bruce stood up. As head of the Wayne Foundation, he had a few remarks to formally open the event. As he passed behind Dick's chair on his way to the podium he graveled "We'll talk later," and Dick seemed to slump slightly in his chair.

Eddie turned to Dick with concern, "A big secret, eh. Hey Grayson, you didn't touch that Houdini book up for sale in the auction, did you?"

Dick said nothing. He certainly didn't mind Selina, nor the changes in Bruce since she'd come into his life, but the increased social contact with other rogues that she brought in her wake, that he could most definitely do without.

Meanwhile, Eddie took the brooding silence for confirmation: Grayson had touched the book and Grayson's secret was exposed. Hmm. The curse was very real and it had a pretty strict interpretation of its mandate. That is, an item up for sale at an auction, potential buyers might want to examine it. A broadminded curse would make allowances, a grace period. So Grayson touched it. It could wait a few hours and see if perhaps he wound up buying it, thereby becoming the rightful owner. But no, it acted at once. This was a rigid and brutal curse, the Batman of curses. He would have to be careful.

Up on the podium, Bruce was welcoming everyone, thanking them for showing up to support the Thomas Wayne Clinic, yadda yadda yadda, and finally explaining the rules of the silent auction: The items for sale were situated around the room. Before each item was a clipboard. Anyone wanting to make a bid should sign their name, their table number, and specify the amount of their bid. One could bid on as many items as they wished as often as they wished. At midnight, the auction was closed and the high bidders would all receive their items.

Bruce then went on to name some of the items of particular interest included in the sale: *Houdini's Tome of Secrets...*

Riddler became nervous. The Batman of curses was on his tail, anything could happen.

*...a pair of cufflinks that once belonged to Rudolph Valentino...*

Cufflinks come in pairs, Eddie thought. Two-Face. What if Two-Face showed up to steal the cufflinks, disrupting the sale and upsetting the curse. The rightful owner, who knew how the Batman of curses would interpret "the rightful owner" of the book if some costumed psycho interrupted the sale!

Eddie shared his concern with Selina.

"Edward," she chided, "Didn't we decide you should stop taking those herbs."

*...an Easter egg made for the Grand Duchess Olga by the legendary Carl Fabergé, opened to reveal a miniature sculpture of a carriage in 14-karat gold...*

Eddie furrowed his brow. An egg. Penguin loved anything with a bird tie-in. Of course, Oswald claims to be retired from field work, but that egg would be just the kind of thing to draw him back.

Again, he shared his thought with Selina.

"Eddie, you're paranoid."

"Especially with that thing in the center, it looks like an umbrella!"

"It's a carriage."

"It looks like an umbrella if you squint. Turn your head a little, see it now?"

"Eddie, I really don't think you want to be having this conversation within earshot of your psychiatrist."

*...and an exquisite etching by the Master of Cologne entitled 'Dreams of Darkness' after his own oil painting by the same name...*

"Look at that thing!" Eddie exclaimed, "It's got bats and cats in it!"

Selina ignored the implication and answered with an art expert's pedantry, "It's an allegory. The sleeping figure is having a nightmare in which evil is represented by night creatures: bats, owls, an armadillo, a raccoon, and yes, a cat."

"Screwed," Eddie grimaced, "so screwed."

From his position along the back wall, Alfred gave a signal and teams of waiters entered with great covered platters. As they began serving, Bruce returned to the table. He was pleased to see Edward Nigma looking dejected.

"What'd I miss?" asked the Fop.

"Doomed. We're all doomed," Nigma answered.

"Ah," Bruce looked a question at Selina, then at Barbara, then Dick, then Zatanna. Getting no answers, he decided a little more probing was in order. "Well if we're doomed, we may as well go down happy. More champagne all around, my good man."

"Kroc duol," Zatanna coughed into her napkin, and an exploding POP shot from the waiter uncorking a bottle directly behind Nigma, making him jump.

"Doomed," Eddie began generating anagrams while the waiter poured the bubbly, "Ed Doom... DoDo Me... Odd Moe."

"Why are we doomed anyway?" Bruce asked with far more Fop in his manner than he would normally allow himself at a Foundation event. "Whatever it is, we should drink a toast to it."

Zatanna was pleased to catalog Nigma's fears with a saccharine smile.

"The concern seems to be that every item in the sale *except* the Tome of Secrets will attract the attention of *some costumed criminal*."

Bruce smiled at Dick.

"Sounds like someone's been sharing his theory about a curse."

"Curse, what?" Nigma sputtered. "Hell no, no curses here. Just because you got cufflinks for Two-Face and eggs for Penguin and Catwoman won't be able to keep her claws off that etching."

"Eddie, I'm sitting right here," Selina hissed.

Before he could answer, there was an earsplitting squeal from the sound system and everybody looked to the podium to see Harley Quinn staring into the microphone like a telescope.

"Is this thing on?" she squeaked. And Nigma pounded his head rhythmically into the table.

"Good evening, ladies and germs," Harley continued, "to avoid inadvertently causing one of my colleagues with the gas canisters letting rip with a cloud of SmileX that will lead to a gruesome and horrible death for all concerned, please remain seated and keep your arms and legs inside the ride vehicle at all times. Very good. Now, if the tall gentleman that looks like Gandalf," she pointed to Alfred, "Yes, you, since you're already standing, if you would just pick up the Punch and Judy puppets and hand them over to Ha-Ha-Harry, then we can all be on our way."

Eddie continued smacking his head into the table, now muttering "Punch and Judy, Punch and Judy."

"Eddie, stop that, you're embarrassing me," Selina whispered.



Harley Quinn stood on the stage in the Great Ballroom of the Robinson Plaza Hotel, twirling a microphone by the cord, singing *Love for Sale*. After a few bars, she pulled Randolph Larraby from his place at Table 5 and urged him, at gunpoint, to sing along.

At Table 1, Dr. Bartholomew observed the performance with concern. Harley was his patient whenever she was incarcerated at Arkham. This stunt was likely to get her sent back to the asylum, back to his couch, and that meant he would probably hear this ditty reprised twice a week for the next six months.

♪-Like the poet's type of love in their childish way-♪  
♪I- know every kind of love better far than they-♪  
♪-If you want the thrill of love-♪  
♪-I've been through the mill of love-♪

And all the while, his other patient, Edward Nigma, sat across from him, pounding his head into the table.

Meanwhile, "the guy who looks like Gandalf," Alfred Pennyworth, was doing as instructed, removing the antique Punch and Judy puppets from their place in the display of auction items and preparing to hand them over to Quinn's henchman, Ha-Ha-Harry.

Randolph Larraby pleaded that he didn't know the words to *Love for Sale*, so Harley urged him to at least join in on the refrain.

Zatanna murmured something barely audible and Nigma's head shot up and looked at her: "You cheating wench," he accused. Then all the auction items, including the puppets and the Tome, floated into the air. Ha-Ha-Harry was alarmed and began fidgeting with his gas mask. Fearing he was preparing to unleash the SmileX, Alfred grabbed the nearest object, Houdini's Tome of Secrets hovering a foot overhead, and smashed it into the henchman's skull. The Plaza waiters who had been taking orders from Alfred all evening looked at each other with concern.

On the stage, Harley Quinn continued to coach Larraby on the harmony chorus of *Love for Sale*, but pandemonium erupted throughout the rest of the ballroom.

♪ *Love for sale* ♪

Zatanna called to Alfred to toss her the book for safekeeping. Bruce slipped silently towards the exit, neatly tripping up a second henchman as he went.

♪ *Advertising crazy love for sale* ♪

Alfred tossed Zatanna the Tome, and an outraged Edward Nigma tackled her at the waist crying "Loose Book!"

♪ *Love that's fresh and still unspoiled* ♪  
♪ *Love that's only slightly soiled* ♪  
♪ *Love for sale* ♪

The Tome flew from Zatanna's fingers to land at Dinah's feet. In a hurry to get away from the crowd and change to Black Canary, she picked it up and passed it to Dr. Bartholomew, who set it on the table.

♪ *Who would buy?* ♪  
♪ *Who would like to sample my surprise?* ♪  
♪ LOVE for SAAAAAAEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE—

Harley's last note turned into a wail when Batman swung in, kicking the last henchman in the kidney, picking up Quinn and hurling her off the stage into Table 1 with a resounding crash.

"That hurt," she whimpered. Then, as one of the plainclothes policemen in cheap shoes handcuffed her wrist, she added, "My head hit something hard."

"That would have been the table," Barbara observed with wicked sweetness.

"No," Harley argued, "It had a corner. Oh, it must've been this book?"

Edward Nigma did a double take and backed towards the door. He was four paces from the exit when he backed into something large.

"What'd I miss?" asked the Fop.

"BRUCIE!" Harley Quinn squealed, dragging the policeman to whom she was handcuffed with her to speak to Bruce. "Mistah J says you're the only one who really understands him. Oh, hiya Eddie; nice tux. Anyway, Brucie, I'm kinda stuck for ideas for a Christmas present for my Puddin'. This Punch and Judy idea doesn't seem to have worked out too well, heh, heh." She gestured with the handcuffs.

"Harley, my dear," Eddie cut in, putting an arm around her shoulder, "You touched the Tome of Secrets. You're screwed. Your deepest and darkest secret is about to be revealed to the world. I wouldn't sweat the Christmas thing if I were you."

"I don't have any secrets," Harley insisted, "except that I don't think Mistah J's octopus joke is funny. Oops." She brought her hand to her mouth, dragging the policeman's wrist with it and hitting herself in the nose with the cuffs.

"And so it begins," Eddie said stoically.

Bruce started to excuse himself, then called Harley back before the police took her away:

"Um, Miss Quinn," he drawled in his best Fop, "since you don't find this joke funny, and I presume you laugh at it anyway whenever your, what do you call him, Pudding, tells it, then in a sense, you've been 'faking it.' I think you should tell him that just as soon as you see him up at Arkham. It will make his day."

"Do ya really think so?"

"Absolutely," Bruce said in earnest.

Harley skipped off to the paddy wagon, telling the policeman she was reevaluating dear Brucie. Time was she was dead set against him, what with the fuss her Puddin' always made about him, but he really did come through this time. Puddin' was right, nobody understood so well...

Bruce turned with a satisfied smirk into the judgmental stares of Selina, Dick and Barbara. After a beat, it was Dick who spoke.

"So another rogue is about to be hospitalized by the romantic advice of Bruce Wayne, Crimefighter Yenta."

"Let's all just sit down, finish dinner, and let things get back to normal," Bruce suggested.

The trio laughed. "We're all that remains of the table, Darlin'," Selina informed him. "Eddie's left spouting conspiracy theories more deranged than an Oliver Stone pitch meeting."

"Dr. Bartholomew," Barbara added, "also left, having spilt a little secret of his own."

"That he's in love with Leslie Thompkins," Bruce declared in his firmest I-Know-I'm-Batman tones.

"No," Barbara volleyed with a distinct You're-Batman-and-you're-wrong twinkle. "He's in *hate* with *Batman*. Batman keeps sending those nutjobs back to Arkham. Bartholomew left muttering about back to back sessions with Harley and Joker, guzzling Maalox straight from the bottle, double dosing Advils, and hoping you would die."

"Lori's backstage," Dick took up the recitation, "getting the Hudson U choir ready to perform."

"With Zatanna, Dinah and Martin, that still leaves seven. We'll make the best of it," Bruce pronounced, ushering them back to the table. "Let's set an example, before too many people leave."

The waitstaff had just finished righting and resetting the table, under Alfred's direction. As the party seated themselves, a woman seated directly behind turned and complimented him.

"You've done a remarkable job," she said appreciatively, "and that was very brave before, the way you stood up to that lunatic."

"Hey, that's right," Dick elbowed Barbara as realization hit, "Alfred pummeled that henchman with the Tome. He touched the book, and nothing bad happened to him."

"What is your name, my good man?" asked the woman.

"Pennyworth, Madame," Alfred answered. To his surprise, her face lit up with recognition.

"Oh good heavens, Pennyworth – and Wayne Foundation – why Pennyworth and Wayne, Pennyworth at Wayne manor! *You're the man who wrote that play!* Jodie, come here, this is the owner of that manuscript I found. You must meet him. Oh, Mr. Pennyworth, you simply must reconsider getting that play produced. It's so funny."

Alfred could feel the eyes of Table 1 upon his back as the woman continued to gush:

"I simply couldn't resist reading a few pages, and it is so wonderfully funny. Mr. Pennyworth, you must reconsider! That ridiculous playboy having his Man Friday making up all those lies to juggle all his women, the man keeping all the excuses organized, what excuse went with which bimbo, in a palm pilot, then quitting to take a better job in Tierra del Fuego!"

"Okay, now I'm scared," Dick said.

"You?" Dinah cut him off, "I actually touched the thing."

"Zatanna!" the gushing woman interrupted her outing of Alfred Pennyworth—Playwright, when she recognized an old friend, "Zatanna, my dear, it's been ages. We never see you at the Sisters of Sappho luncheons anymore."

Dick and Dinah turned to each other and mouthed in unison: "Sisters of Sappho?" Then Dick turned to Barbara, "Honey, I'm scared, I want to go home." While Dinah turned to Martin, "We're leaving, go get the car."



*Another charlatan exposed, another con man prevented from taking money from grieving mothers and widows. And yet, for every false medium I put out of business, another comes forth to take their place. It's this dreadful war. So many good people have lost someone on the battlefields at Gallipoli, or in Belgium or France. So many will grasp at any hope. With each new case, I become convinced the charlatan's greatest tool is not any knowledge of the conjurer's art, but the client's own desire to be deceived.*

*Never underestimate the power of self-fulfilling prophecy, or of self-delusion.*

Bruce reread the last sentence as the Schubert Impromptu on the CD transitioned into the second movement.

Self-fulfilling prophecy.

He thought back to the night of the Gala... Had Nigma's obsession with the curse foiled his plans for the Tome exactly the way he feared? Riddler didn't have anything to do with Harley's appearance, that much was certain. But the Harley incident was a minor one compared to most criminal interruptions at Wayne Foundation events: it ended before the salads were served, there were no casualties, no paramedics, and only one table overturned. After Quinn was removed, the evening could have continued if Nigma hadn't planted all those suggestions:

He told Harley her secret would be exposed, and within seconds she opened her mouth and blurted it. Bartholomew too had heard Eddie talking about the curse at dinner. Of course, Alfred and Zatanna had no hand in their secrets being revealed, but so what? If it hadn't been for all of Nigma's curse talk, Dick and Dinah never would have interpreted the revelations the way they did.

Within fifteen minutes of Nigma's departure, so many people were leaving the ballroom, the party broke up. By midnight, when the sale would have formally concluded, only Bruce and Selina were left in the ballroom.

*Never underestimate the power of self-fulfilling prophecy...*

Indeed. Look at Dinah's behavior, so rattled after the party, she thought the valet who brought Martin's car looked like Oliver Queen. Then they passed a delivery van for *Green's Dry Cleaners*, saw a taxi advertising *Quiver Printing*, and Dinah made Martin turn the car around and take her back to the Plaza. She found Bruce in the empty ballroom and insisted if a secret of hers was to be revealed, she would decide which one and to whom.



"Can I borrow him, Selina?" Dinah had asked, "I'll bring him right back, I promise."

Selina gave an amused shrug and Dinah led Bruce away.

"It's the cave," she whispered when they were alone, "the secondary cave, under the Wayne Building. We've – we, the girls and I, - I mean, Batgirl, Spoiler and I have been using it as a clubhouse since July."

Bruce gave the most piercing Bat-stare he could manage without the cowl. As expected, it brought about a more detailed confession:

"It started when you and Dick were having the big quarrel, and we all sort of wanted a flee square... then after a few weeks... I guess we sort of... got comfortable."

The stare continued, but no new details were forthcoming. Bat-stare gave way to Bruce-smile.

"I know," he said with a surprising lack of 'I'm-Batman' arrogance. "There was a certain amount of cheese doodle residue."

Dinah sighed with relief.

"Thank goodness. Because Ollie and J'onn said if you found out, JLA meetings might become the OK Corral again and--"

"WHAT!?" Bruce exploded, a much angrier Bat-scowl replacing the smile. "Oliver and J'onn, do you mean there've been JLAers involved in this? That there's been... they've been in town, *my town*, using *my cave* as a, a... *clubhouse!*"

"Oops," Dinah deflated, "didn't know that part, huh. Well, um, Martin's waiting in the car, I really have to go. Tell Alfred how much we enjoyed... oh never mind."

She slunk away defeated, muttering how you can't outsmart a curse.



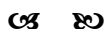
*I have mastered the arts of escape and deception in order to entertain. But since the death of my beloved mother, I feel I am called to use this secret knowledge for a higher purpose. I will put a stop to these fraudulent spirituals profiteering on the grief of others.*

Bruce had returned to this page for the fourth time. At first, he never intended to read the section on mysticism at all. It didn't interest him. He was curious about the chapters on escape, for obvious reasons. Houdini was the greatest escape artist of his day, and Bruce had made the pilgrimage in his years of travel to Appleton, Wisconsin, to a museum that housed the thousands of locks, shackles and contraptions the famous illusionist defeated. Some were rigged stage effects, but most were genuine. The notes the museum had preserved revealed a little of Houdini's methods, to those who knew enough to understand, but were not nearly as complete as the Tome.

The notes were circumspect, careful. It was expected they would eventually fall into lay hands, and Houdini was most careful his words would not reveal the secrets of his trade to those not already in the know. In the Tome, he was writing for himself, and he let himself go. The pages revealed not just techniques, but the mind of the man who wrote them. Bruce found that mind intriguing, and interested in knowing it further, he delved into those other chapters he originally thought were irrelevant.

He discovered a man driven by the death of a parent to a mission to stop those preying on innocents.

On the CD, the third movement of the Schubert began...



"Merry Christmas," Selina had purred with that naughty grin that still stirred him, even as it signaled something he would undoubtedly object to.

"Three days yet," he frowned.

"And you know what a stickler I am for rules like that."

He took the gift from her hand, kissed her cheek, and pulled on the ribbon. As the paper fell away, he stared at the object it concealed:

"The Tome? But this is..."

He looked up at a raised eyebrow framing Catwoman's delighted, taunting gaze daring him to finish the sentence.

"...stolen."

"Technically," she chirped, intolerably pleased with herself.

"You stole the... from a Wayne event... you stole the Tome with the... the cursed Tome... with the curse on it... rightful owner... and you... *took it...*" he sputtered on incredulously, voice pingponging between Bruce and Batman, while she laughed.

"Well first," she began, in that tone that always made his neck muscles tense, the voice that said *Buckle up, feline logic ahead*. "It was the Wayne Foundation selling the thing to raise money for the Wayne Clinic, so if you want to be completely anal about this, write yourself a check."

He grunted out of habit. It was the only response he'd ever devised to "feline logic" that didn't lead to claws and blood loss.

"And second?" he asked, bracing for even more felinity.

"And second," to his surprise, it was Selina's voice that answered, gentle, tender, without a trace of Catwoman's amusement, "I don't think 'rightful owner' has anything to do with who paid for the thing."

"An opinion you've made abundantly clear over the years."

"Houdini wanted the thing destroyed," she insisted, "Do you really think he'd care if Eddie or Zatanna or Randolph Larraby pays you \$5000 for the privilege of taking it home? No, if Harry's avenging spirit is watching over that book, he'd want it in the hands of his true heir. And who is the greatest escape artist since Houdini?"

Bruce grunted, and looked down at the book.

"You're welcome," Selina concluded.



The third movement of Schubert's Impromptu #90. This is what he was listening to the night Catwoman broke into the manor... a distant click, a meow, and he found her opening his safe, inviting him to act out his fantasy.

It was dawn. Calculating that was nearly noon in Paris, Bruce picked up the phone and dialed the Paris Ritz. He confirmed that certain arrangements were in place, and then...

::Hello?: a sleepy voice murmured.

"Good morning, Kitten. Slept off the jet lag?"

::Well I hadn't,:: as she spoke, the voice deepened from sleepy to sultry, ::but the café au lait that just arrived should help. This is your doing, I take it::

"Read the card."

::What card?::

"Between the chocolate croissant and the rose, there's a card."

There was a tap as she sat down the phone, then after a pause:

::Meow::

"I'll let you go now, you're going to view the collection at Dior at two. I just wanted to call and tell you, I stayed up reading last night. I'm enjoying my Christmas present."

::That's nice. Mine sucks::

"Yeah, being flown to Paris, put up at the Ritz and expected to go shopping on a billionaire's tab, that really bites."

::It's the thought that counts, Bruce. And the thought behind this sucks::

"Selina... you know what I'm like this time of year."

::Yes, I do. And I know why. And that's why I should be there. Not sent half a world away::

There was a long pause.

"Dior at two, then Balmain at four, and Chanel tomorrow morning. They'll keep you busy with fittings after that, and in between, there are the perfumeries and museums."

::I know where the art is in Paris, Bruce::

"I got you a ticket to the opera for Saturday night."

::Bruce, this is ridiculous::

"And go to Cartier. Buy yourself something nice, something extravagant. Money's no object."

::And now we've reached the guilt portion of our phonecall?::

"Anything but pearls."

There was another long silence, then an audible sigh.

::...You win. I'll see you in three weeks::

