



THE MAN BEHIND THE BAT, THE WOMAN WITHIN THE CAT
THE LIFE BETWEEN THE PANELS, THE TRUTH BEHIND THE MASKS

#33

Cat \equiv *Fables*

Cattitude



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
CATTITUDE

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CATTITUDE

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*Mysterious Cat, Wise Cat, Wondrous Cat*

—Baudelaire  
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Catwoman's Rule #... oh, why bother. I don't like him being right, that's the heart of the thing.

"I'm not good at introspection," I said. "Bad things happen when I try it."
"I see. You'd rather just stuff everything away in a closet somewhere and ignore it?"

He doesn't get to declare victory on that. Absolutely not. I won't have it.

I have to clean out that closet now, and that's all there is to it.

I don't like introspection. I don't like rooting around in reminders of the past. I don't like looking back. I see no benefit in it, I never have.

You know where cats come from? No. I'll tell you why: Because nobody knows. Their origins are a mystery. Most people assume they first appeared in Egypt, but they show up in Sanskrit writings in India from around the same time. Some say they're descended from the big cats: tigers, lions or leopards. But others say they're closer to the fox.

Nobody knows their past, and that's how it is. Look into a cat's eyes some time. They're not telling.

But I still have to face up to the past and clean out that closet. It isn't to prove Bruce wrong; he's right: I don't like looking back... and that's exactly why it has to be done.

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*In the beginning, the wild cat was domesticated and the Egyptians called it Mau. This cat was greatly admired for its virility, ferocity and agility and was sacred to the goddess Bast, the center of whose cult was Bubastis on the Eastern Delta of the Nile.*

*A fragment of papyrus from the XVIII Dynasty states that the male cat is the god Ra himself and took the sacred form of the cat to slay an enemy. The document states and that he was called Mau because of the speech of the god Sa who said: 'He is like unto that which he hath made, therefore did the name Ra become Mau.'*

*In domestic life, the Mau was the subject of home worship whilst still enjoying the role of adored pet, frequently adorned with jeweled necklaces and gold earrings. Favorite daughters were often given pet names like Mau-sheri, meaning 'little cat' or 'kitten.'*  
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The first shock, the first nasty shock of what I'm sure will be many, is finding the pendant, an amethyst teardrop the size of my thumbnail with a little round of silver filigree at the top... my mother's. It was a gift from my father the night of her final

performance. She'd risen from the corps de ballet to a soloist, but would never, I am told, have become a prima ballerina. I never understood why. I thought her movement when she danced was the most astonishing feat of grace and loveliness imaginable. She could make her body bend and flow like water then pivot and soar... or freeze rigid, her whole body balanced impossibly on a square inch of satin.

Our house was large—not quite as large as Wayne Manor, we weren't that rich—but large enough that my mother had her music room. I wasn't supposed to go in there. My shoes smudged the highly polished floor, and my curious fingers smudged the mirrors as well. But I used to sneak in anyway to watch her, and gradually I learned to avoid being seen in the mirrors or squeaking on that perilous floor... I learned stealth.

When I was five, I was allowed to begin lessons. I was so excited. At the barre, demi-plié... grand plié, the bending warm-ups, and then at last moving to the center of the room, adage, first position, looking into that mirror, a little miniature of my mother as she stood behind me.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF THIS? SOMEBODY PLEASE FUCKING TELL ME!
...Christ.

At least Bruce has somebody to blame. Icy patch of bridge, dark night, cold river. Nobody's fault. Not even the consolation of a drunk driver.

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*Long before the teachings of Buddha enlightened the peoples of Asia, a temple was built high on the slopes of Mount Lugh by the Khmer tribe of western Burma. The temple was called Lao Tsun, and it was here that the Kittah priests worshiped the golden blue-eyed goddess Tsun-Kyan-Kse, to whose care the transmigration of souls was entrusted. The temple was guarded by many white longhaired cats with yellow eyes into whose bodies, according to legend, passed the souls of dead priests.*

*One such cat, whose name was Sinh, was the personal favorite of the High Priest Mun-Ha. One day, as Mun-Ha knelt to pray before the statue of the golden goddess, he was killed by invaders. Sinh leapt upon the body of his master and looked up into the sapphire eyes of the goddess. At that moment, the soul of the priest entered the body of the cat, whose fur immediately took on the golden glow of the goddess, and its eyes became a brilliant blue to match her own. Sinh's nose, ears, legs and tail darkened to take on the color of the earth but his paws, resting on the body of his dead master, remained pure white as a symbol of purity. Thus the Birman, the Sacred Cat of Burma, came into being.*

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I guess I might have blamed God if the thought had occurred to me. Anger is one of the stages of grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Except not everyone does it in that order, that's a myth. I went straight to depression. The rest would come later.

Denial wasn't an option, not really. There was no way to hide from the reality: I was alone. Both my parents, my home, that feeling of being safe and loved, it was all gone.

Oh shit.

The money. Home. A coffee table: gray and white marble top, cherry or mahogany beneath, with these little lunettes of handpainted Limoges in little brass frames... A

white damask sofa, another one was pink... And there was a second table, much deeper gray marble with a gold leaf base. More gilding on the picture frames... There was a colorful one. Would that have been a Chagall? And a Cezanne etching. A Rembrandt engraving. Carved dining room set with brass lion's heads drawer pulls.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF THIS?

We were rich. When they died that all went away.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF THIS??

We were rich. And when they died that all went away. I guess maybe... in a way...

WHAT IS THE POINT OF THIS???

Lots of people are rich. Look at Bruce. Lots of people lose their parents. Again, look at Bruce. That doesn't mean...

I guess maybe I associated the wealth and the luxuries with the safety and the love and the home feeling I'd lost.

What POSSIBLE value is there in knowing that???

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*The Romans adopted the Egyptian reverence for cats, and it is Caesar's legions that were largely responsible for introducing cats to the rest of Europe. By the 4th century AD, the domestic cat had totally ousted the stone-marten in Rome as the revered rat-killer.*  
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Carmine "The Roman" Falcone. Now there's a name out of the past. Scrawled into the back of a second year Latin textbook, with a little sketch of the Roman Centurion they had mounted on the heavy iron gate.

Why did I keep this?

The textbook was mine, from Miss Corinne's. The sketches, doodles really, are also mine. How I hated Latin. Why did I keep this?

And why didn't that pretentious snot Falcone use a Falcon instead of a Centurion? Maybe too fascist.

When my parents died, I was sent to my godmother. She was headmistress of Miss Corinne's, possibly the dreariest girls' school in the Northeast. Don't get me wrong, it was no cruel orphanage out of a Brontë novel. On the contrary, it was one of the best boarding schools in the country. It was just... dreary. I remember the whole place as gray: gray skies, gray walls, gray uniforms, gray light through the windows made even the white pages of the textbooks seem gray. My godmother was also gray, both her hair and her outlook. I'm sure she tried, in her way, to give me a real home there, but her life at the school seemed so limited to me. She had never married or had children or a family of her own. She oversaw the care and education of other people's children, who stayed for a time and then moved on while she remained. And for this she was paid a small sum every month. It seemed a very small and gray and limited world in which to live out your entire life.

Dreary. Limited. Gray. I never fit in there. How could I? Thrown in with a lot of strangers who couldn't begin to understand why I was so 'quiet and moody' when it had been all of six months since my whole life had been torn away from me.

So I snuck off every chance I had and explored the grounds near the school. It was a part of Long Island that is quite wild, like Heathcliffe country. Most Gothamites don't realize how much wilderness there is so close to the city. I don't remember taking textbooks with me on those excursions, I certainly wasn't going off to study. But I obviously brought this one at some point, for here it is, complete with grass stains on the endpages and a doodle of the Roman Centurion on Carmine Falcone's front gate.

There were feral cats, of course, in that wilderness that surrounded the school. One in particular I remember: all black with a little scar on its back hip from some ancient mishap. I never had the gumption to name him; that seemed presumptuous. But in my head, I thought of him as Tug—for Rum Tum Tugger in Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats—my father used to read it to me. "For he will do as he do do, and there's no doing anything about it."

I knew this was a wild animal, but I wasn't a bit frightened. On the contrary, I relaxed when Tug came around; instinctively, I relaxed. There was a natural, immediate connection; this little creature understood. Unlike the students at the school, Tug didn't seem to mind if I was quiet and kept to myself. He'd go off by himself, or sometimes he'd sit with me quietly and lick a paw. But if on any day I did want to be sociable, he had plenty to teach me. He taught me you can never keep a cat out if he wants in, or keep him in if he wants out.

And he taught me to climb.

From the trees, I found I could see over the high walls and spy on the neighbors. The Falcone compound was a sight to see. Carmine Falcone called himself "The Roman," but I see now that it was never meant to be taken literally. He would not have been "The Neapolitan" or "The Sicilian" if he came from those cities instead. He called himself Roman because he ruled an Empire, he commanded soldiers, he commanded loyalty. I didn't care about any of that. I saw the guards with the machine guns, and I knew what it all meant, but I didn't care. What I saw beyond those high walls was that Carmine Falcone seemed to have everything I'd lost: a large rich house, a big loving family, and all the luxuries.

Of course it didn't escape my notice where all that wealth came from. It came from crime.

And I certainly had no love for my fellow students at Miss Corinne's—the spoiled, stuffy, narrow-minded, over privileged students at Miss Corinne's. They too seemed to have everything I'd lost.

So one night I took something back. I don't even remember what it was. Probably a gold charm off a bracelet, there were a lot of those, presents from the boyfriends they juggled and passed around like a joint at a pot party. My first theft and I don't even remember what it was, isn't that something? But I remember the feeling all right. My first high. They could keep their marijuana; I'd found my drug of choice. In fact, if they didn't keep their marijuana, I would have been out of business before I'd even begun. All those thefts, never reported. Turns out, dumb little twits stash their valuables where they hide their stash.

"This is a great deal of money to be missing, Ann Marie; where did you keep it?"
Heh, if Ann Marie can't answer that question, she better keep her mouth shut.

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*And, we pray, protect specially, dear Lord,  
The little cat who is the companion of our home,  
Keep her safe as she goes abroad,  
And bring her back to comfort us.*  
— An Old Russian Prayer  
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Now this I know why I kept: A solid gold cigarette case with a cocktail napkin from Beau Geste folded inside. Where would I be now, I wonder, if I hadn't tried to take Sean Dehaney's cigarette case at Beau Geste?

It's frightening really, to look at your life and realize if it wasn't for that one occurrence...

When I had enough money, I ran away from Miss Corinne's—NOT to live off my body on the harsh city streets, that's for damn sure. (Why oh WHY didn't I do something about that sordid unauthorized bio when it came out?)

I figured I had a good thing going with this ripping-off-students routine, but there were many more agreeable places where rich people dumped their kids. I went to Switzerland, got myself enrolled in the most exclusive (read: expensive) boarding school going, near the Italian border. It wasn't nearly as difficult as it sounds.

At that time everybody, from travel agents to finishing schools, were going to computers and none of the employees quite knew how they worked. They didn't trust the machines at all. If you had convincing paperwork, such as can easily be typed up if you're smart enough to sneak into an empty office after dark and acquire the right letterhead, they became downright apologetic: Of course your reservation isn't in the computer, the damn thing has been acting up all week. It screws up if you look at it funny. That's okay, dear, we'll straighten it out later. Things like this never happened before when we used index cards...

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*But the Kitten, how she starts,  
crouches, stretches, paws, and darts!  
What intenseness of desire,  
in her upward eye of fire!*  
— William Wordsworth  
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I thought the Swiss school would be like Miss Corinne's. Boy was I wrong. These were jetset kids, thrill seekers. They taught me a thing or two. They taught me a thing or ten.

My roommates were Anna and Natasha. A couple times a month, we'd sneak out. We went into Milan mostly. My mother's family came from Italy and I spoke the language a little. The Italians aren't nearly as snooty as the Swiss or the French about your accent, especially if you're una bella ragazza. We'd go clubbing or sometimes

shopping. When you're seventeen in a fashion Mecca, it's 'shopping' whether you pay for the stuff or not. I always preferred stealing outright, but Natasha liked to get men to buy her things. Most often she'd pretend to be a runway model, or sometimes a Russian princess in exile. It was interesting enough to watch, rather like Pammy doing her thing, minus the ragweed. Anna reserved her larcenous efforts for the nightclubs. She didn't steal from the shops; she'd pay always. Daddy's credit card, that was her revenge for being sent off to boarding school. Anna was a striking beauty: long brown hair, very straight, high cheekbones, exotic eyes. She looked like her mother, which is apparently why Daddy didn't want her around where he'd have to look at her.

We were at it for almost a year when we met Sean. We were making the usual round of nightclubs: Coquetel, Rock Hollywood, Beau Geste. The man who introduced himself as Sean Dehaney was younger and better looking than most of the old guys who sometimes hit on me in these places. He was maybe 42 or 43, sandy hair only receding a touch on the sides, rugged features—the kind who really needs to have a suntan year round... still way too old to be messing with teenage girls. And when you're 18, a 40-year-old man may as well be a dinosaur anyway. But here's the thing: poor old men know better than to even try. So Sean Dehaney, who'd seen forty winters if he'd seen ten, had to have something more going for him than crow's feet. He had to have a reason to think he had a shot. He was allowed to buy me a drink or two.

After two gin & tonics sipped in pleasant (if boring) conversation, I took the opportunity to take his cigarette case. I had just closed my hand around it when he grabbed my wrist and I felt this white hot pain shoot through my hand. I couldn't move, couldn't scream, and for a second I must have actually blacked out, because the next thing I knew he had me propped against a stone wall in an alley behind the club. Anna and Tasha were there too, looking cornered.

He told us we were amateurs, bungling it, but he could teach us. Theft needn't be a petty criminal act, it could be an art—but only if engaged in by artists. Whoever he had been before he took the name Sean Dehaney, he was MI-6, retired on a joke of a pension and not voluntarily. He only spoke about that once.

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*When God made the world, He chose to put animals in it, and decided to give each whatever it wanted. All the animals formed a long line before His throne, and the cat quietly went to the end of the line. To the elephant and the bear, He gave strength; to the rabbit and the deer, swiftness; to the owl, the ability to see at night, to the birds and the butterflies, great beauty; to the fox, cunning; to the monkey, intelligence; to the dog, loyalty; to the lion, courage; to the otter, playfulness. And all these were things the animals begged of God. At last he came to the end of the line, and there sat the little cat, waiting patiently. "What will YOU have?" God asked the cat.*

*The cat shrugged modestly. "Oh, whatever scraps you have left over. I don't mind."*

*"But I'm God. I have everything left over."*

*"Then I'll have a little of everything, please."*

*And God gave a great shout of laughter at the cleverness of this small animal, and gave the cat everything she asked for, adding grace and elegance and, only for her, a gentle purr that would always attract humans and assure her a warm and comfortable home.*

*But he took away her false modesty.*

—Lenore Fleischer, *The Cat's Pajamas*

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Sean was right, he did have a lot to teach us. From martial arts to safecracking to rock climbing. We set up shop in Paris. There were six by the time we were ready to begin: Natasha and Anna were paired with Anton and Bobby, respectively. Sean found them grifting in a casino in Cannes, I think. Each was handsome enough in their way: Anton was always smoother, more refined, which somehow took the edge off the red hair, moustache and goatee that might otherwise suggest a pirate. Bobby was rougher around the edges, dirty blonde, blue eyes, quite the charmer. Tasha's brother, François, joined us too and I was partnered with him. Aristocratic features, tall, dark hair, deep blue eyes—just my type. We were a hell of a team for a while. We could get in and out of anywhere. No prize was unattainable. No hotel or casino, no palazzo, chateau or castle was beyond our reach. We rotated: one pair was diversion, one acquisition, one clean up. We left no trace.

It was exciting. We were young. It was Paris. The oldest of us was 24. There was sex in the air. Quite a lot... I guess it did all blur a little: the heady thrill of the heists, the physicality of the sparring, and the sex.

I never realized that 'til this moment. Even after the catsuit magnified it so powerfully, I never realized... It's funny isn't it? How the things we do—and don't even think about at the time—help mold us into who we become.

What IS the point of all this???

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*Way down deep, we're all motivated by the same urges. Cats have the courage to live by them.*

— Jim Davis

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There's a curious growling behind me and I turn to see Nutmeg at the far end of a cleared path, pulling mightily on a little piece of white fabric. She has only a mouthful worked loose, the rest is firmly trapped under a large box of ...?... junk, a box of junk. I lift it out to be pitched whole, and the rest of the fabric pulls free. Nutmeg is delighted, and when I see what it is, so am I. It's a t-shirt: L'Université Paris IV Sorbonne.

I started attending the Sorbonne the week of our fifth heist. I happened to see a placard one day at a little bookstall along the Seine; the program of the year's studies was for sale. I picked one up. All the professors were listed, with the subjects of lectures, places and times. It looked interesting: there were cours libees, open lectures available for anyone to attend. One that looked appealing was happening the next afternoon so, on an impulse, I went to look. I found only a note on the door that

monsieur le professeur was still at his country house and his talk would be rescheduled at a later time. I was tickled. The guy blew off his class because he was enjoying himself in the country and decided to stay on a few days longer? Up until then my only contact with education had been the terribly limited teachers at boarding schools. This monsieur le professeur was clearly another breed. He had a life!

The next lecture I tried, the speaker did show. M. Galimarde from "The House of Cartier" which took me a minute to process that that meant THE JEWELERS! Even for Paris, referring to a business, however prestigious, as if it were a reigning family was a mite pretentious. The talk, on the other hand, was hypnotic for one in my particular line of work:

"At the dawn of the modern age," M. Galimarde said, "those with great wealth started to feel guilty about showing it off. This was obviously very troubling to the sellers of great jewels and they scrambled to find ways of making outrageous luxuries seem somehow 'practical.' Thus, a long piece of semi-precious lapis lazuli, instead of being transformed into a mere sculpture as art for arts sake, might become the handle for a gold letter opener! Something useful, you see, functional. Sometimes they'd add a clock too, right in the handle, making it doubly practical."

It was interesting in an odd way. I went to another lecture... A different monsieur le professeur had extended his summer holidays. His talk on Pre-Revolution silver would be rescheduled. At the lecture after that, I learned how to distinguish the first, and therefore rarest and most valuable, engravings off a plate by the presence of a velvety black burr where the ink clotted on the metal shavings.

About that time, Sean pulled me aside one night when we were following a couple from the Ritz. "An art student is a good cover in Paris," he said, grabbing my wrist just exactly the way he had that first night at Beau Geste. When I looked down, I was holding the cigarette case. Inside were several folded thousand-franc notes. I gathered this was for tuition or textbooks... whatever else he imagined were the expenses of my "cover."

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The smallest feline is a masterpiece.

—Leonardo da Vinci

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Sean got his return on that investment before we parted company. I became the unofficial art expert of the group the night we hit a very grand townhouse in Rue de Berri just off the Champs d'Elysées. It was something about the building, mid- or late-19th Century, very very upper even then. I remembered that first lecture on Cartier: making the most outrageous luxuries seem practical by disguising them as some kind of useful items... When electricity came into vogue, the great houses did away with bellpulls to call their servants. Instead, they installed electrified buzzers, like our doorbells. These were the novelties of the day and...

I made François wait while I made a complete search of the apartments. Natasha and Anton were our diversion, and they had to go on improvising a lovers' spat in the café across the street. They had to go on much longer than intended, and Bobby and Anna were waiting on the roof to come in and erase any sign of our presence after we'd left.

Everybody was waiting but I didn't care; I knew I was right. I found twelve in various bedrooms, drawing rooms and dining rooms: little pillbox size enclosures for the buttons that called the servants. I got a rush like that very first theft back at Miss Corinne's. They were all vermeil, a gilded silver the French perfected in the 18th century and went on making through the 19th. The ones I found downstairs were set with rubies and onyx; the ones upstairs had emeralds and opals. My heart was beating so fast I could barely see climbing down the escape ropes.

I'd done it. I had. Me. My knowledge, my instincts, my skills.

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*Matagots or magician cats were said to bring wealth to the home where they are well-fed. According to French legend, a matagot must be lured by a plump chicken, then carried home without the prospective owner once looking backwards. Then at each meal, the matagot must be given the first mouthful of food. In return, it will give its owner a gold coin each morning.*

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Look at this one: a canvas totebag with a map of the Paris Metro printed on the side. My first cat-carrier—as witnessed by the lovely shredded bits at the handle and seam. Colette's claw marks. Colette was here.

I didn't leave the team immediately. I did get my own flat. Natasha and Anton wanted to move in together anyway. François's family had a townhouse and he assumed I would come live there. Just assumed I would jump at the chance! I never understood that. He never understood why I wanted my own place. And he never understood why I wanted to work alone.

"François, we've had this conversation already. Paris is a city of museums. They're everywhere. It seems like you people have a passion, if not an actual fetish, for collecting stuff on absolutely every subject then organizing a museum around it, whatever it is."

"Oui, Cheri, I do understand. I agree with the whole of my heart. And that is why I want 'in' as you Americans say. There are museums, there are jewelers too, there is enough bounty here for everybody. So why not have an adventure or two on our own, no?"

"On MY own, François. It's not on my own if you come along."

"You said—what was the word?—have some 'extracurricular fun.' How does my coming along interfere with that?"

"Because—"

"And for that matter, why do you say 'if you come along' like I am some stray cat following you home for a bowl of milk! It is not like I'm not every bit as good at this as you are, Selina, I have skills—"

"Yes, you have skills. That's the point. François, I want to see how good I am on my own. Me! Alone. Comprenez? With you, I'd just be one-half a team instead of one-sixth of one. I want to see what I can do myself—moi-même."

"Meow."

We both turned to see a genteel little ball of mewing fur that had hopped into the windowsill of my new flat. The sun was behind her and I couldn't make out a bit of

detail until I got closer. It was a Siamese, with whiter fur than I'd ever seen. I thought before then that Siamese were all tan with brown markings, but this one, creamy white with "dark" patches of light gray. Her eyes were the most astonishing blue. She was... absolutely beautiful. I don't know why, but I teared up just looking at her.

"You two belong together," François remarked bitterly, "Me, me, moi, meow."

He left and I barely noticed. I spent an hour getting acquainted with my new little soul mate.

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*Legend has it that Siamese cats were kept to serve as repositories to keep the transmigrating souls of Siamese royalty. Residing only in the Royal Palace in Bangkok, it is said they were the product of a union between an albino domestic cat belonging to the king and a black temple-cat from Egypt.*

*The kinked tail, it is said, came to be when a royal Siamese princess, whilst bathing, placed her rings for safekeeping, on the tail of her favorite cat, who obligingly 'kinked' it for that purpose.*

*The squint, another inherent Siamese feature, is said to have originated when the priests of ancient Siam set the temple cats to guard a valuable vase. The cats carried out this duty for so long and with so much concentration that their eyes became permanently crossed.*

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I named her Colette, in François's honor. He got over his disappointment soon enough, and his apology was a little cloth-bound book entitled *Le Chatte*. It was written by Colette. François told me she was "France's most feline writer." He thought I would like it. He was quite right.

I continued in Paris for a while: The Louvre, The Musée d'Orsay, de l'Orangerie, de Picasso, de Rodin, des Arts Décoratifs, du Petit Palais, d'Art Moderne... it went on and on. It was a city of museums—and jewelers. Cartier, Chaumet, Piaget, Van Cleef & Arpels. I guess it's no wonder I settled on jewels and art.

How I loved that flat. My own little lair. The freedom of it, the absolute independence. Colette taught me that. As well as we got along, she never moved in entirely. She would crawl in the window most evenings and share my dinner. She would sleep over most nights, especially if it was cold or wet, and once I even let her accompany me on a prowl but...

Oh God. I feel such a shiver, standing half way back in the closet, that I have to grab onto the wall... which pushes a few things onto my feet. I think for a minute I might actually faint. Certainly the kerplow of whatever is hitting my foot seems very far away.

It's exactly what I did with Bruce. I slept over. But I never took a step towards moving in. Not until he pushed the issue.

I actually feel ill. I'm going to faint or throw up if I keep doing this. What GOOD is this???

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*A cat has nine lives. For three he plays, for three he strays, and for the last three he stays.*

— English Proverb

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CHAPTER 2

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*The cat has always been associated with the moon. Like the moon it comes to life at night, escaping from humanity and wandering over housetops with its eyes beaming out through the darkness.*

—Patricia Dale-Green

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Daughter of the moon, that's what my name means. I knew that long before the Sensei told me. Selene is the moon goddess of ancient mythology. -ina is 'little one' in Italian, the -a makes it feminine, a daughter, -o would be masculine, a son.

Only in moonlight can the enchanted swans of Swan Lake resume their true forms. That's how my father first saw my mother: on stage as one of the swan maidens bathed in moonlight. He was as thunderstruck, he said, as Prince Siegfried confronted by Odette. He got tickets for the next performance, and the next, and the next. It was seven nights total before he arranged to meet her, through one of the ushers, I think. When he did, she recognized him at once: "The gentleman from the third box that is so fond of the ballet?" This with a sly smile that let him know she understood: it was really her he came back to see.

Hm... I've never let Bruce know. I can sense him that way when he's watching me, but I've never let him know.

But of course with Bruce it's an entirely different thing.

Or actually, with Batman it was an entirely different thing, but with Bruce it's becoming more and more...

No, it's different.

Still.

Swan Lake was my mother's favorite ballet. Like all classical dancers she dreamed of playing the swan. The swan is, in fact, two different roles: Odette & Odile, the white swan and the black, the romantic heroine and the daughter of the evil sorcerer. They are danced, always, by the same performer, for they are identical in appearance. Odile is sent to impersonate Odette, and she fools the Prince with her deception. A metaphor perhaps; everyone has a dark side.

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*Cats are a mysterious kind of folk. There is more passing in their minds than we are aware of.* —Sir Walter Scott

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I haven't gone back into the closet since it made me sick. I'm sure Alfred thinks it's odd, the little stacks of things I've left around the room. Those rooms aren't technically his concern; the suite is my territory, absolutely and completely. That was established

before I would move in. But he walks through each day to bring my water to the exercise room. He knows I was cleaning out the closet, and now he must wonder why all progress seems to have suddenly stopped.

Alfred's disapproval is hard to ignore. I don't think I ever appreciated how stanch, resolute, indomitable, and mule-headed stubborn Batman really is until I met Alfred and glimpsed what he had to endure just to become Batman in the first place. In the beginning, Alfred did not approve of this life. He still doesn't approve, in fact, of most of it: the danger, of course, and the indignities of the Fop. He makes no secret of it: he does not approve. And somehow, Bruce can let that all slide off.

I confess I don't find it so easy. Alfred reminds me of Sensei.

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*Although all cat games have their rules and rituals, these vary with the individual player. The cat, of course, never breaks a rule.*

*If it does not follow precedent, that simply means it has created a new rule and it is up to you to learn it quickly if you want the game to continue.*

—Sidney Denham

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I met Shirumare Sensei the night I left Paris. It was raining and taxis were scarce, but I simply had to get to the train station before I changed my mind. I'd already lost two taxis and resorted to an especially Parisian trick: closing my umbrella and letting the rain soak my blouse and skirt. Colette, hunkered inside my tote bag, yeowled her displeasure, but the silhouette produced by ruined silk plastered tight against my body conjured a taxi from thin air. But in the time it took to lift my suitcase, a determined Asian man of about fifty had his hand on the car door. I tried to block him with an eyeful of cleavage but he said:

"No trouble, we can share. I too am leaving town. And I would not leave you standing in weather like this; I know cats don't like wet."

I agreed, not really having much choice.

"How did you know I'm leaving town?" I asked once the cab was moving.

"Your suitcase," he noted.

"Ah."

I felt stupid, but I figured that at least covered the obligatory smalltalk. I planned to say no more until we reached our destination, but Colette had other ideas. She peeked her head out the top of the tote, an utterly pissed off ball of very wet feline, and again she let the world know exactly how little she enjoyed soaked fur.

My companion was astonished.

"And who is this little creature?" he asked.

"This is Colette, the cat you saved from the rain."

He laughed. "No, I meant you. I didn't know the cat-woman in the rain had a cat-cat of her own."

I stared stupidly but Colette decided to make friends. She crawled out of the tote and into his lap. He began petting her.

"W-what do you mean?" I stammered finally.

"You move like cat," he said, "chasing the first two cabs. I saw at once, that woman is cat. But you have had a very bad sensei."

Colette looked up at him angrily—not because she cared if he called Sean a bad sensei, but in doing so he had raised a finger, wagging it at me. Colette continued to stare until he returned the wagging finger to her chin.

"Your sensei taught you like wolf and bear. What is a cat doing trying to be a wolf?"

I had no idea what he was talking about, but Colette seemed to be transported. She leaned into him, purring a purr so loud it could be heard over the raindrops hitting the car roof.

"All martial arts are based on the movement of animals," he said patiently. "You are like this one, you are a cat. You are stealth, speed, climbing, poise, balance, and grace. You are coy, and sass, and wit also, but those will come later. You are cat. Yours must be the moves of a cat. Not bear, and not wolf. You will only take root and thrive when you are allowed to be what you are. It's okay, all you do wrong can be unlearned. Will take six months to fix. We go to Fiesole. No interruptions."

"Thank you, no," I said firmly, "Cats don't go off with strange men they meet in taxicabs, particularly not to 'get fixed.'"

The taxi pulled into the train station and we said our goodbyes. I never realized until now what had happened. It was the first time I had called myself a cat.

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*Refined and delicate natures understand the cat. Women, poets and artists hold it in great esteem, for they recognize the exquisite delicacy of its nervous system; indeed, only coarse natures fail to discern the natural distinction of the cat.*

—Les Chats, Champfleury, 1885

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"Shall I bring your tea in here, Miss?" Alfred asks from the doorway.

"No thank you, Alfred. I don't want anything."

Total waste of breath, and I know it. Like asking Batman to look the other way, just this once, about some trinkets from Tiffany's. It's coming up the stairs now, inevitable as a batarang: a little tray with a tiny one-serving pot, sugar bowl, milk pitcher, and plate of biscuits on a linen doily. In a minute, he's going to lay it on the desk, exactly as if I'd asked him to bring it instead of specifically saying the exact opposite.

Like all those sandwiches going down to the cave... Why? It's more than just ritual...

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*Civilization is defined by the presence of cats.*

—Unknown

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Rome was a lot like Gotham. It is a bustling modern city, despite the ruins of 2,000 years past that stand between a modern pizzeria and a luxury hotel. It's a city that has

been the absolute center of its world. And the Romans are very much like Gothamites, a bit brusquer than others, zigzagging through traffic on their scooters or bustling through a throng of tourists. They are worldlier too, never letting that bustle intrude on the important pleasures of life such as iced coffee and people-watching on a summer afternoon at the Café Dolce Vita. And through it all, they project this aura of being an absolute extension of their city.

I did NOT go to Italy because of that conversation with Sensei. I went because I needed to get out of Paris. François was gearing up to propose, I could tell. I tried to wave him off, but he wouldn't take the hint. Men can be terribly, terribly dense about hints. I was sure Sean wouldn't mind my leaving; he had to know it was coming. If I wasn't the first to go, it would have been someone else. The team was destined to break up; we were too young. We had to find out what we could do on our own. If it wasn't me, it would have been one of the others. And if I stayed until he proposed, I would have had to say no.

When I reached the train station, I had no destination in mind, anywhere would do, and I picked Rome. I was an art thief after all, and wasn't Italy just as important to the art world as France?

I'd forgotten about the cats. My parents brought me to Italy when I was nine; we traveled all over. I was too young to understand much, consciously, but it all made an impression. Still, I'd forgotten about those cats. There are hundreds of feral cats in Rome. They prowl the Coliseum especially, but they're in the piazzas too, and the cafes. Everywhere I went, it seemed, there was a four-footed furry reminder of that brief conversation with a stranger in a Paris taxi...

"You are cat... You will only thrive when you are allowed to be what you are."

I went to Florence. The city is a living work of art. It is more than that; it somehow generates art... Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Giotto, Donatello... the list goes on and on and on. It spews forth genius... Galileo, Dante, Machiavelli, Boccaccio, Brunelleschi... It's a half-day's walk to Fiesole from Florence. There was no reason to walk, I could have hired a taxi or rented a car. But I decided to walk. Uphill. Damn hot. But I decided to walk. I'll never know why. Up a steep winding path... past some luxurious villas I planned to visit after hours before leaving the vicinity. I was beyond exhausted after the climb, but god almighty it was beautiful.

I never learned Sensei's name in the taxi, and Fiesole is more than a tiny village. But like any Italian city, it has one supremely important square that outranks all the others: Piazza Mino. Once the Forum when this was a Roman City, the piazza still housed the town hall, the cathedral—and most importantly, the city's main café. The proprietor of the main café in the main piazza of an Italian city can tell you anything if he is inclined—and if you are una bella ragazza he will be so inclined.

My Asian friend was Japanese, I learned. His name was Shirumare. And he lived in a little casa in Via Marri past the ruins of the old Etruscan settlement. He had left instructions at the café: When una donna della via la gatta, "a woman with the way of a cat," came asking for him, the proprietor should tell me all of this, he said. But when it came to giving directions, Shirumare was very specific: the proprietor was to make sure he sent me by way of Via Verdi.

I didn't ask why. By this time, I was getting used to the idea that I would seldom understand the whys with Mr. Shirumare.

In the case of Via Verdi, however, I learned the answer to my unspoken question immediately, before I'd even reached Shirumare's house. Via Verdi had a panoramic view of Florence that was nothing short of magnificent. And it was peppered with houses—villas rather—mansions. Million dollar views are only enjoyed by million dollar houses, and million dollar houses are owned by people with millions of dollars. Million dollar houses contain million dollar prizes.

In these houses, I knew before I even knocked on Shirumare's door, is where I would learn what it was to be a cat.

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*If you want to know the character of a man, find out what his cat thinks of him.*

—Anonymous

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A cup of tea sits at my elbow. I pick it up and sip, then nibble a slice of pound cake. It's Bruce's fault that he's this way. An ordinary butler, I'm quite sure, does not go pressing food and drink on his charges if they've refused it... I give Nutmeg a bite of cake... Nothing about Alfred is ordinary.

I may have overstated it when I said Alfred "disapproves" of Batman. It's more like, well, he cares about Bruce. He's been a teacher and a mentor and a doctor and a friend. And he's done all of that, not because it's his job, but because he loves Bruce. To him, the most important thing in the world is that Bruce is safe, that Bruce is happy and that Bruce is at peace. And that's what drives him against Bruce being Batman. It's not really a question of approval or disapproval, it's the fact that Batman's quest most certainly works against those other priorities. So Alfred needles him. He must know it's pointless, but that doesn't stop him from trying.

He must know most of the sandwiches will remain untouched. He must know most of the soup will grow cold. He must know Bruce will continue to return home close to dawn then drag himself to an early meeting at WE "just to keep up appearances."

Alfred knows all that, and still the sandwiches come, the bowls of soup appear on the workbench, and the suit gets laid out on the bed every morning. Why? Well presumably because Alfred feels his responsibility is to help Bruce be as comfortable as possible, to help Bruce be happy. And if Alfred cannot convince him to give up his quest, then at least he can make things that much easier on him.

And okay, food being food, habit being habit, and stubborn men set in their ways being stubborn men set in their ways, I can kind of see that, living here now, I'm part of the program: If I'm anywhere in the house, under the house, or on the grounds at 5 o'clock, then Alfred is going to come find me and set a pot of tea at my elbow. It's unfortunate that that sort of lumps me in with Mr. Grunt & Brood, but I can't quite work up a lot of indignation about it. Cats have their pride of course, but cats are also rational. It's a cup of tea. Cats are practical. It's a cup of tea and plate of cake. And above all, cats know to purr and not hiss when someone takes the time to stroke their fur.

So the tea I can accept for what it is: an incidental byproduct of Alfred & Bruce's cold war.

But that doesn't explain those boxes.

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*Which is more beautiful—feline movement or feline stillness?*

— Elizabeth Hamilton

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The day began with meditation. I would meet Sensei at dawn at the ruins of the old Roman amphitheatre, the edge of the pine forest, or on special occasions, a small plateau with a breathtaking view of Florence. We would meditate for perhaps ten minutes, then run through a series of stretches and Yoga postures. Another few minutes meditation, and then Sensei would reach for a thermos and pour two small cups of Hoji-cha, his special roasted green tea.

I would then spend an hour watching Colette sleep, play, or hunt and share my observations of her with Sensei.

Then we would return to Sensei's home and work out for the remainder of the morning. It was physically grueling, more taxing than any workouts with Sean or Francois, and at first I had difficulty getting through the lessons without breaks.

Sensei was very firm: "You cannot thrive until you will be what you are. You will find strength and stamina when you release the cat within you. Chinese legend says the cat is product of a lioness and a monkey. From the lioness, the cat gets beauty and dignity. From the monkey, cat gets curiosity and playfulness. You already have beauty and dignity. You must still find the playfulness."

I couldn't imagine how playfulness figured in to my being thrown and tossed onto the mat time after time. Sensei said I would learn to "feel the technique." I wanted to tell him eating risotto wouldn't make me a better cook, but one doesn't say such things to one's Sensei.

The afternoons and evenings were mine. I was to go into Florence and absorb.

"Absorb what, Sensei?" I asked once.

"Its life," he answered, then he made a face like that wasn't quite right. He looked around as if searching for a word, and made a gesture to the air, as if it was an indefinable something he meant.

"Its spirit," I suggested, "or attitude." He shook his head no. "Its *Je ne se quoi*," I prompted.

"No, decidedly not that. Do not say it in French." He looked very stern. I didn't understand, but I went into town each day. I would visit the markets, or sit in the piazzas, or in the cafes. I visited the shops that make beautiful marbled paper and the leatherworking school. And of course I would wander the city's marvelous museums, gardens, and churches.

Slowly, over the course of a month, I began to understand—not what the mysterious it was, but why Sensei didn't want me to say it in French. The art of this city was as magnificent as that in Paris, the food was as good if not better, but somehow there was

a joy in it here that Paris lacked. The Italians made it all look easy; there was a relaxed casualness.

I remembered shopping in Milan. It is every bit as important a fashion capital as Paris, but it isn't all taken so damn seriously. In Paris, choosing a dress is a monumental decision. In Milan, it's a kick.

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*Always the cat remains a little beyond the limits we try to set for him in our blind folly.*

— Andre Norton

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Look at them. Boxes. 4 of them. They appeared here while I was downstairs having breakfast. I came back to the suite and there was Whiskers hopping in and out of one. They're the perfect size for the stacks that remain around the room when I get back to the closet cleanup.

Not exactly subtle.

It's so not subtle I'd be tempted to suspect Bruce rather than Alfred, but Bruce was with me in the dining room the whole time.

It's definitely Alfred. It's definitely not subtle. It's definitely a nudge to finish with the closet.

I've scratched men's eyes out for less. I would scratch at anyone that dared presume tell me what to do that way.

It's just that... it doesn't seem like presumption somehow coming from Alfred. It seems like... Bruce's sandwiches.

It seems like Sensei's eccentric directions.

"Today you go to Piazzale Michelangelo, wonderful view of the city, good restaurant. But is very important you go by way of Vialle Machiavelli, the main road from Porta Romana."

"Yes, Sensei." I didn't ask why. There was never a why, and there was always a why. Vialle Machiavelli turned out to be just like Via Verdi, it brought me past one of the most fabulously wealthy houses in Tuscany, Villa Cora.

What's odd is: looking back, I don't think Sensei approved of stealing. He never said anything; there was never the slightest hint of judgment or censure. He knew how I was going to use what he taught me. He would stress the stealth and predatory skills while I studied Colette. And he sent me past these fabulous mansions full of prizes. And yet, somehow, there was...

Well, he always said I had to be what I was in order to thrive. If he knew I was a thief, then obviously that meant...

But.

I'm more than that, aren't I?

It took me a while to get there, but I finally nailed down that there's more to me than stealing.

I guess maybe it was something I had to get through in order to...

Fuck, what's the point of all this?

Those boxes are sitting there. I guess maybe...
The only way to get through it is to get through it.

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*With the qualities of cleanliness, affection, patience, dignity, and courage that cats have, how many of us, I ask you, would be capable of becoming cats?*

—Fernand Mery

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Now that I'm thinking about it, it's eerie. I really don't know how Sensei felt about stealing. But I am forced to realize that, whether he approved or not, I really don't know why he helped me the way he did. I suppose the closest he ever came to explaining was in Venice. Carnival. My first mask.

I'm back in the closet, and my hand is trembling. I've woven priceless gems through a cat's cradle of hairline sensor beams without so much as a quiver, but the object I hold now makes my fingers vibrate. It's my first mask: a cat, of course, papier-mâché, painted with gold leaf and silver, red enamel, highlighted here and there with an orangish-gold glitter. It only covers half the face, no whiskers, but the shape of the eye holes, and the outline of cat ears rising above the brows, there is no question what it's meant to represent: Meow.

"You must wear mask for Carnival," Sensei said. "Mask is not for hiding, it is for freeing what is inside. When it is not your face but this screen that the world sees, the essence of you will come forth."

I thought he was drunk. And when the guy you've gone to Venetian Carnival with is drunk, he ceases to be your Sensei and becomes a friend at Harry's Bar who is hogging the pinot noir.

"I'll have another Bellini," I told him, rolling my eyes, "because I've clearly fallen behind."

He shook his head. "Such an American you are sometimes. The mask is like the drink, but it is different. You will see; you will lose your inhibitions, but not judgment and instinct and reflex. Waiter!" he called out, "this woman gets no more to drink unless she puts on mask, you understand?"

"Si signore, no bellini per la donna senza mascherina," the waiter agreed. It might seem strange. In Gotham it would be—even in Italy at another time of year it might be. But during Carnival in Venice, it was accepted as a perfectly natural request. No drinks for the woman without a mask.

I did put it on. Why not, it wasn't kowtowing; it was playing along. Humoring my drunken Sensei. I felt silly for the first few minutes and then... Free. Empowered. And just a bit aroused by it all.

I walked Sensei back to his pensione (he was a bit tipsy after all), and then I strolled through the city, my true face concealed—and revealed—by the mask.

The next day, while we did some sightseeing, Sensei said "You know Karma?"
"Karma means destiny, doesn't it?"

"Y-yes, in a way. Karma is your path. The Universe knows what it is doing. It has plan for you. It has your path—just for you. You follow path, you will thrive; you stray from path, you get lost. True self knows the path. Understand?"

"Yes, Sensei." I lied. He knew. He went on.

"The mask is a way to release your true self. You already knew your self was cat, but no matter. These others, maybe they not know, but they can find out their selves the same way. Once a year, to have such a party, to wear the masks, it is good. It is important, to be that true self always. Follow your strengths, do what you enjoy, do what you are good at, do what pleases you. Be with those that please you. The rest will take of itself. Understand?"

"Yes, Sensei."

"No, you don't."

I was starting to get annoyed. We took a motor launch out to Murano and saw the glass blowers. I bought a sculpture of a cat and a crystal box. Then Sensei tried again.

"...do what you are good at. Be with those you enjoy. The rest will take of itself. Understand?" "Yes, Sensei." "No, you don't."

We went to a second island, Burano, where they make lace and linen. I bought a tablecloth.

"...Understand?" "Yes, Sensei." "No, you don't."

We had a late lunch at Torcello. "...Understand?" "Yes, Sensei." "No, you don't."

That night, there was a masked ball at Palazzo Pisani-Moretta overlooking the Grande Canal.

"...Understand?"

"...Meow."

"Good."

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*In a cat's eye, all things belong to cats.*

—English proverb

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My fighting skills improved, and Sensei said I need only come to him three mornings a week. I spent more time in Florence. Like Paris, it's a city of museums, about sixty. I began visiting them after dark instead of during the day. I learned to defeat the security at each one and to navigate their darkened galleries as naturally as lovers strolled the Ponte Vecchio.

I strolled the Ponte Vecchio too, but not hand in hand with a dashing young ragazzo. I strolled for the jewelers, the dozens of gold-dealers in their quaint stalls. I learned to read the manner of jewelry store clerks, the way they handled better pieces, the way they sized up customers. And I learned how to glean from the daytime operations where the top quality merchandise was kept after dark.

When I was ready, I visited Villa Cora—on the Vialle Machiavelli, the main road from Porta Romana—the villa I couldn't help but see when Sensei sent me to Piazzale Michelangelo...

In 1865, Florence became the capital of Italy and Baron Gustav Oppenheimer got married. The Baron decided to build a palace worthy of his bride's beauty. The lavish parties became the talk of Florence, and the social whirl became so giddy that Oppenheimer began to doubt his wife's fidelity. He filled the palace with explosives and was about to blow it up when the police talked him out of it. Oppenheimer left Florence and the Villa went to Empress Eugenia of France. There were more parties that thrilled Florentine society, but ultimately private wealth could no longer maintain the opulent and extravagant artworks Baron Oppenheimer had commissioned. The Villa was converted to a hotel, a hotel that augmented the fabulous art collection with an equally fabulous collection of aristocratic and over-jeweled guests.

I came away with four miniatures, an oil painting on wood, a small bronze statue, a ruby necklace, two diamond rings, and a bracelet.

I never said goodbye to Sensei. I knew he would understand. Colette had already become his cat.

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*One reason we admire cats is for their proficiency in one-upmanship. They always seem to come out on top, no matter what they are doing, or pretend they do. Rarely do you see a cat discomfited. They have no conscience, and they never regret. Maybe we secretly envy them.*

—Barbara Webster

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I was only on the Italian Riviera for a few weeks. It was long enough to fence what I'd acquired in Florence. I couldn't get much, being an unknown in the tiny world of the international black market. But the contacts I made more than made up for the lack of substantial income. I would make up the difference on future deals.

And of course I met Fabrizio. It wasn't love, but it was certainly fun. I learned a thing or two about living on a yacht. I learned the ins and outs of offshore banking and numbered accounts, which has certainly come in handy. And most of all, I learned there are rules. Not their rules, my rules: There are things I won't do. I could have taken a few things before I left; God knows Fabrizio kept enough useless luxuries on that yacht. But even if it wasn't love, we were good together for a while, and to turn around and steal from him, no. Nice bad girls do not mix work and play. Absolutely not, I decided right there. Love was love, theft was theft, and never the twain would meet.

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*To understand a cat, you must realize that he has his own gifts, his own viewpoint, even his own morality.*

—Lillian Jackson Braun

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CHAPTER 3

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*Those who'll play with cats must expect to be scratched.*

—Cervantes  
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I can't sleep. I am curled into the nook under Bruce's arm. As he breathes, a scar on his chest rises and falls under my fingertips. Four parallel scratches. Mine. In Italy, I had said I would never mix work and play. Heh.

I think about slipping downstairs for some warm milk, trying to decide if it's worth the effort. I *can* get out when he coils around me this way, but it takes some doing. He must have had a bad night. It happens this way sometimes. He'll be especially late so I won't wait up, and then I'll wake up like this. He'll have pulled me into his arms like he's protecting me from something, like all that matters is keeping me safe and comfortable. Almost always there will be fresh bruises on his knuckles... and usually a story in the Times the next day about some incident: a shooting involving a child or a body found in an alley. It isn't always obvious what set him off. And if it isn't, forget getting him to talk about it.

Sometimes I think it's just fear of losing the battle. He *cares* so much; he feels every setback. Anyone else would shrug it off: one step forward, two steps back, get 'em tomorrow night. But Bruce, no. If tonight went wrong, that's all he sees. Absolutely blind to how much better Gotham is now than when he started.

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*In the middle of a world that had always been a bit mad, the cat walks with confidence.*

—Rosanne Amberson  
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I came home to Gotham City. After Italy, it all seemed strangely... overcast. I had forgotten how tall buildings block the sun—and I'd forgotten that consequent thrill, after walking through blocks of dense skyscrapers, of coming to a patch of brownstones or a parklet and feeling those glorious rays of golden glow warm your skin. All cities move in their own rhythm. Gotham's is a sexy, angsty staccato compared to Florence, Paris, or even Rome. I found I had adapted my step, falling into the city's tempo, within a half hour of hitting midtown.

I was home.

I checked into a residential hotel in the Village, just off Washington Square, for the few weeks until I found a proper apartment. Now, I am in no way a "downtown" girl. Of all the bizarre ideas those trashy tabloids have come up with, this lower eastside business might just be the most nonsensical. There are upscale condos, galleries and nightclubs below the fifties, lord knows, and I've kept a lair or two nestled amidst the

lofts of SoHo and TriBeCa. But the museums, the jewelry stores, the best galleries, the social register crowd, the new money, and their stationers—so useful for dropping in after hours and to lift an invitation proof for any event I wished to attend—were all uptown. I planned to move (and prow) in the same circles I had in Europe, and I planned to be situated somewhere convenient to my prey. There was never any question of settling anywhere but uptown.

There was one useful, if disgusting, benefit to those few weeks spent in the Village. At that time, Washington Square, despite being the heart of a bohemian-trendy neighborhood, was the crack and cocaine capital of the U.S. The simple day-to-day business of living there, from buying an umbrella from a street vendor to picking up ice at the convenience store, gave one a tentative access to the criminal grapevine without having to have any contact with the street scum themselves.

I was a loner and not interested in making friends, but if I had been, it certainly wouldn't have been with riffraff off the street. But certain aspects of the riffraff's rumormill did warrant attention: There were whispers... about a Bat-Man. The upstanding citizens in more insulated parts of town would have heard nothing at all back then. And to the more marginal elements in places like the Village, it was all urban legend: a half-man half-bat that flew about the city attacking the night people, feeding on their blood. A vigilante-vampire. Or a ghost. Or a demon. Ha-ha. But amidst the scum, the stories were more insistent—and more consistent. They weren't quite so fantastic. And they had a strange ring of truth—not the words themselves but the manner in which they were repeated—a touch of dread hanging low and heavy in the air, a residue of the panic this thing had pulled from them.

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*I am as vigilant as a cat to steal cream.*

—William Shakespeare, Henry IV

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The warm milk is good. It should be after all I had to go through to get it. Bruce asleep can be almost as difficult to escape from as Bruce awake. I tried simply easing out from the heavy, muscular arm wrapped around my body... It clamped down harder, and the other arm came over to join it. I whispered towards his ear, "Bruce, I'm getting up for a bit, let go" ...His jaw stiffened, right in his sleep, and the arms tightened around me just that much more.

I didn't want to wake him, at first, out of kindness. He'd obviously had a very rough night; he was exhausted and needed the crash. But now he was just being stubborn. Now it wasn't kindness, it was a dare: I had to get out of the bed without waking him because he was being a willful, inflexible BAT and a girl does not let a willful, inflexible bat keep her from her dish of cream.

I placed a hand on the first arm, stroking down the tight, defined braid of muscle, all the way down the forearm to the hand. I tried lifting it gently off me... when it turned so that *his* fingers now had *my* wrist. I resisted the urge to hiss, I slipped out of it easily enough, and sighed....After a minute of reflection, I saw the solution. With my toes, I grabbed onto the bottom of the bed sheet and slowly pulled upwards until it

snaked around the back of his leg. I tried easing out from under the arm again, but this time when he adjusted, I tugged the sheet behind him. As I expected, it must have felt like the cape was being troublesome, for instinctively he shrugged his shoulder to tame it. That gave me the opening I needed to slide out and slip a pillow into my place under his arm. He settled and gave a soft grunting sigh.

And I came down to the kitchen to heat my milk.

As I sit, sipping, I notice the black and white geometric tile pattern of the kitchen floor. It is similar to the entranceway at the Charles Mann Penthouse.

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*A Cat, with its phosphorescent eyes that shine like lanterns, moves fearlessly through the darkness, where it meets wandering ghosts, witches, alchemists, necromancers, grave-robbers, lovers, thieves, murderers, grey-cloaked patrols, and all the obscene larvae that only emerge at night.*

—Theophile Gautier 1811-1872

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Charles Mann was said to be the savviest art collector in Gotham, that's why I was interested. I didn't care that his money came from a chain of health clubs that used Da Vinci's famous Vitruvian Man as their logo. I didn't care that Man is the answer to the riddle of the sphinx or that his name and logo made him an appealing target for an emerging "theme criminal" called The Riddler. I cared that he owned a Miro, a Chagall, a Picasso and two John Sloans.

Mann's apartment building was on the riverfront; it looked out on the harbor—which reminded me of the spectacular views of those villas in Italy. There was a hotel down the block that was easy to enter inconspicuously. Once inside, I had no trouble gaining access to their roof. I found traveling even that short distance over rooftops to be exhilarating, but I saw at once I'd have to find a better way to swing from one roof to the next if I wanted to make a habit of it.

I used the window-washing gear to get down to Mann's penthouse, but when I went to disconnect the window alarm, I found the whole system was already offline. I slipped inside and clung to the darkness behind the curtains... and watched.

There was movement. A figure, confident and cocky, walked back and forth before a long wall, looking at the artwork. He wore a sweater over some kind of greenish leotard, and the sweater had a large question mark in bright yellow on the front and back. Then he clasped his hands together, rubbing the palms, and laughed.

It wasn't a discreet laugh. It wasn't a necessary laugh. I figured if this guy would traipse around in eye-catching yellow making that kind of noise, the penthouse must be empty. So I stepped forward and spoke at what I assumed was a safe volume.

"And what are you supposed to be?"

He turned and looked me up and down.

"You're cute," he said. "Beginning with a question, that's very good. I am The Riddler."

What impressed me was how he said it, like it meant something, like *I am the King of Belgium*.

"Ah," I said with a nod, because it was a reasonable answer in its way. Then I introduced myself, in the same rhythm that he had, if not with the same bluster, "I am the burglar. And you're sort of in the way. So kindly go riddle somewhere else."

"Cute. You're the burglar. But where's your style? Your panache?" And then—this stranger in a question mark sweater & leotard looked right at my tits. "Ah, er, scratch that," he stuttered without moving his gaze, "You... ehm... have panache."

I said thank you—there was no point in being rude when he meant it as a compliment. But I did consider that to be the end of the conversation. I started taking the Miro off the wall.

"Uhm... toots, I appreciate you removing that for me but... isn't it kinda heavy?"

"Not removing it for you..." I grunted, leaning it against the wall and starting on the Picasso. "...not heavy..." I leaned the Picasso into the Miro and started on the Chagall. "...Call me toots again and I'll break your arm," I concluded.

"I like your spunk, kid. Riddle me this: What did the prospector say when he struck gold?"

I brushed past him, hauling the paintings toward the window.

"He said: Oh look, there's a lunatic in a green leotard in my goldmine getting in my way—"

"He said: IT'S MINE!" and with that, this crazy man yanked the paintings from my hand and pulled a gun on me. I was starting to get annoyed.

"Now look, Riddleman, I don't know how you're accustomed to settling these things—"

"Riddle-ER."

"Oh, right, RiddLER." I treated him to a dazzling smile. "You can call me Macavity."

He cocked his head to the side like a dog hearing an unfamiliar noise. Then he smiled and pointed at me. "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats. Macavity is the master criminal, 'the hidden paw,' the cat thief. You're a cat burglar, so you call yourself Macavity. Ha ha! Yes, I like you, Cat. You have a puzzler's brain."

"Meow."

Whatever he might have been expecting, I guess he didn't expect to be meowed at, because he sort of jostled the gun and it started spurting this pinkish gas. He waved his hands to try and clear it, and pointed, coughing, towards the window. We relocated quickly to the ledge outside the penthouse. I was livid.

"Well that's just great! It was a day and a night's work getting in there and what do I get for it—nothing!"

He coughed, dusted himself off, and produced a small box from under the sweater.

"At least the night wasn't a total loss," he said.

"Mr. Riddler, What do you call a poker player that raises his bet with a two, three, five, seven, and ten?"

"Someone who's bluffing... oh."

I started to leave, climbing back up to the roof, but when I glanced back, he looked so disappointed. I hopped back down.

"Since you've gone and ruined my evening's work," I said, "can I ask a blunt question?" He looked up, and I could just tell, you can *always* ask this guy. As long as

it ends in question mark, he'll play. "What's with the weird getup? I mean, for sneak thieving, it seems a little... green."

"I want to be known, to be recognized."

"You want to be famous? You want to be a famous criminal? How does *that* work?"

"Everyone wants to be known for something. For me, it's my brains."

"And... calling yourself Riddler and wearing a green leotard with question marks... shows off your brain?"

"No, my RIDDLES show off my brain ... the clothes identify me." I could tell he was getting frustrated. I was trying, but it seemed like utter nonsense. He was looking me over again.

"What's your story with that get up?"

"It's black," I told him, "it's hard to see in the dark. This is traditionally considered a good thing for cat burglars."

"Tch, tch," he clicked, "Overrated."

"Excuse me?"

"You're thinking inside the box."

"..."

"Have you ever considered wearing something in green?"

I laughed at him, I admit it.

"I was thinking... something that showed some leg... cleavage... you know kinda like a swimsuit..."

"I know what you were thinking," I told him. "I'm not a team player. Goodnight, Mr. Riddler."

"Eh," he called as I started to leave again. "You can call me... Edward."

"Purrrrrhaps," I answered. I'm not sure why I said it that way, it was an impulse. He swallowed—hard. So I figured I had a bargaining chip. "But I want something in exchange. If I were to want... an outfit of some kind—not green, sorry, it's not my style—where would I go?"

We were twenty stories above street level on a window ledge, but he looked around like he was afraid of being overheard, then he whispered a name.

"Kittlemeier."

I quietly unlocked my flyline so I could swing down to the fire escape instead of having to climb up to the roof.

"Kittlemeier," I repeated the name, "Thanks. You can call me 'Lina... Goodnight, Eddie."

I leapt down, blew him a kiss, and swung away into the night.

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*It is in the nature of cats to do a certain amount of unescorted roaming.*

—Adlai Stevenson

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After the milk, I'm not quite ready to go back to bed, so I wander the house for a bit. It is, after all, a grand house full of the richest prizes, the kind I could easily have decided to visit one dark night on a prowl.

I bypass the portrait gallery above the Great Hall, the Impressionists in the dining room, the Faberge in the morning room, the engravings by the four great masters of the art hung one on each wall of the study. These are the rooms in daily use, the most lived in parts of the house—Bruce's house. These are the rooms where he's letting me into his life, where we're living together, where we're trying to...

I want to wander somewhere... impersonal. I want to prowl.

What was once the east drawing room became a movie and game room back when Dick lived here. Beyond it, there's a dim, murky corridor right out of a gothic novel, and at the end of that—a room with a very special collection—the armory. There may have been one or two suits of armor in the house originally; that might be how Bruce got the idea. But he's collected most of it himself. Armor from... everywhere. Chain mail, mesh, plate... Celtic, Roman, Viking. Chest plates of Norman crusaders and Japanese samurai, gauntlets from the followers of Charlemagne and Attila, helmets of Mohawk warriors and Highland chieftains.

It's exactly where I want to be, more like roaming an empty museum than a private home...

For a while.

Until I begin to notice...

I knew of course; I knew why Bruce assembled this collection. When he was preparing to become Batman, this was his research. I knew that, but it was still startling, noticing the similarities, the little details taken from here and there for Batman's costume.

It wasn't an impersonal room at all.

It was his mind at work.

Bruce's mind becoming Batman.

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*Just as the would-be debutante will fret and fuss over every detail till all is perfect, so will the fastidious feline patiently toil until every whiskertip is in place.*

—Lynn Hollyn

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Kittlemeier understood me from the very first interview. I went to his little shop wearing the mask from Venetian Carnival. He was a little irate about that, like it was an insult, not letting him see my face. I explained what the Sensei had taught me: the mask wasn't to conceal, the mask brought out what I wished to be—or rather what I

was—the mask freed that part of me, and I wanted a complete costume that would do the same.

He nodded. Made a few suggestions. We settled quite quickly on a catsuit. A leather catsuit.

“Very goods,” he said, scribbling on his little pad, “Now den, leather comes in four basic varieties: cowhide, often used for belts and handbags...”

“Kidskin,” I cut him off, “it’s soft and thin enough to be flexible, but still strong. You can reinforce it with cowhide at the seam if you need to, but only if you need to. It might be enough to just triple-stitch it. Bit of lambskin will be okay at low-stress points. And use full-grain only, so it feels warm and soft to the touch, with a little grain like skin, none of that cold film over it like split leather. And vegetable tanning, not chrome. I wouldn’t want to plug all the pores so it can’t breathe. I think a *napa* finish will be just purrrrfect.”

He stared, openmouthed.

“Dat is lots you know about leather for lady thief in mask,” he said.

I winked. “I spent a bit of time in Florence. Gucci, Ferragamo, Testoni... took the tour at the leather school a few times.”

“So thenz, vhatz color you be wanting?”

I didn’t have to think about it. It was the mask, just like Sensei said, it made it automatic, instinctual. All I had to do was trust the impulse. Open my mouth and let the answer come out.

“Purple.”

Kittlemeier nodded approvingly, like that was just the answer he expected.

I’ve never stopped to wonder where the impulses come from. Karma. The Universe has a plan. Purple—the color of royalty—for a new Queen of the Night...

...or maybe...

Shit.

Maybe the color of an amethyst teardrop, the color of grace and loveliness personified.

There must be some point to all of this.

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*The city of cats and the city of men exist one inside the other, but they are not the same city.*  
—Italo Calvino  
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I was kidding myself. There can be no “impersonal” places to wander here. It is Bruce’s house. Batman’s house.

You can’t fight against fate. Just ask Harvey.

So I’ve accepted the situation and come to sit in the library. It is a lovely room, even if it is so entirely his. I sit at his desk, looking out those monstrously oversized windows, out at that spectacular city across the river, lights twinkling off the water like a jewel. His city. His conceit to call it that, but there is an element of truth in it if you look on it a certain way.

I glance away from the windows to the portrait over the fireplace.

The shooting of Thomas and Martha Wayne in a fatal alley off Park Row did not make Gotham City into what it became. Let's not kid ourselves; it was not the Fall of Man, although Bruce and others have been known to speak of it that way. The truth is, it was always there: the guns, the poverty, the drugs, the envy, the despair, the gangs, the desperation, the greed, the violence, the decay, the corruption, the festering hopelessness... all those intangible grays he tries to reduce to a simple five letter word:

Crime.

Preferably written in bold black type on virgin white paper.

It was all there long before it killed Thomas and Martha Wayne. But their deaths brought it into sharp focus. It was the first obvious indication how bad things were; it aimed a spotlight on the extent to which the shining city was changing.

It only got worse in the coming years while Bruce prepared for his mission. By the time he emerged as Batman, and I returned from Europe, the ugliness had taken hold. You didn't venture into the parks in daylight much, let alone at night. You could be mugged on a main thoroughfare as likely as a side street. And the subways were Drogheda.

It wasn't Hell; only fools and drama queens throw that word around about a place like Gotham. It was worse, in a way, because it was manmade. There wasn't any timeless malevolence behind it all, it was just... what human beings can descend to when they let themselves forget they can be heroes.

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*A cat is a puzzle for which there is no solution.*

—Hazel Nicholson

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The enigmatic Mr. Nigma found me through Kittlemeier, and we met a few times for drinks. It always began the same way:

"Reconsider my offer?"

"No."

"Damn."

"I work alone."

"OK, A LIER WON."

Or sometimes it was "WEAK LION OR" or "LAKE I NO ROW" or "OW LINEAR OK"... always an anagram for "I work alone." Then he'd flag a waiter and we'd order a few drinks.

One particular evening, in the Palm Court at the Plaza Hotel, I waited impatiently for those drinks to come and the waiter to scoot so I could hear the news. I was quite sure there was news because—apart from the murmurings of the rumor mill, which were far from reliable—Eddie was sporting a spectacular black eye.

"Well???" I asked, the moment the waiter left.

"I hate how you do that. Well, what?"

"Don't be such a tease, Eddie. Is it true? You had an encounter with the mythical bat?"

"He's no myth, that much I know."

I pouted. It was starting to sound like the rumor mill had, yet again, got it all wrong. "No myth, *that much I know*" didn't sound like much of an *encounter*, it sounded like there was a funny-looking shadow and something went bump in the night. I had been strangely excited when I heard Riddler had met up with this Bat-Man. Riddler I knew—I knew *personally*—I could get a firsthand account from someone who had seen this thing in the flesh. But now... I really was disappointed—very disappointed. I was disappointed out of all proportion to the importance of this silly nonsense in my life.

I finished that first drink quickly and ordered another. After a bit, I pressed again:

"So the stories aren't true. You didn't see him firsthand?"

He looked at me with something like anger, and pointed to his eye.

"No, not in time, anyway. What are you grinning at, Cheshire cat?"

"You did see him."

"This guy is good, 'Lina. A worthy foe... maybe too worthy. He GOT my riddle. And he moves fast. God, is he quick."

"Yum."

He looked really offended at that. So I played up to him. "Poor guy, have another drink to console yourself. My treat." That kind of thing. Before long he was seeing it differently.

"Yes, a worthy foe. A challenge, I can see that now. He will make a most exhilarating challenge. I made those first riddles too easy; that was all. But this, this new development will press me onward to devise new and better puzzles! I shall achieve conundrums never dreamed of in the mind of man!"

I purred.

"That's wonderful, Eddie. Now tell me... *everything*."

"It was going like clockwork: I left my clue, gave them the standard twelve hour minimum..."

I nodded, and his eyes flickered around the room, just checking, I think, that we weren't being overheard.

"It was a cannery, not my usual taste, but their payroll spends like anyone else's, and naturally who would suspect it?"

"Good theory—but then?" I wanted to encourage him but at the same time move him along to the good part with the bat.

"But then! And how. I didn't hear him. I swear he's like a shadow. One minute, this corner is dark; the next, he's standing there—watching me."

"They say he's a vampire—or a ghost."

"He doesn't hit like an apparition. He just stood there at first, like some kind of animal stalking prey. He said the answer to my riddle. He asked why I was doing this. Like people don't know? Doesn't everyone get it?"

It wasn't what you'd call a pleasant story. Losing was a new experience for Eddie, the fist hadn't been pleasant, and I think he resented the solving of his riddle even more than the black eye.

"He trussed me up with this rope... and hung me out to dry. I only managed to get loose once I picked a lock in the GCPD hoosegow..."

But through all of this, I couldn't help notice that underneath all of the bruised ego, he was exhilarated by it. There was certainly something exciting about it: Who was this guy that wasn't a ghost but could come and go like a shadow?

And how good was he really? How fast? How strong? Was he really everything Eddie was saying or was that a sop to his ego? Sort of: If this Bat-Man beat him so thoroughly, he must be all that...

Whatever he was, the cat in me wanted to find out. I had to meet this guy.

"Sorry to hear that, Eddie. Chalk it up to a bad night. You'll rally. You'll get 'em next time."

"Of course I will. Don't you think I know that?... That smile is back. 'Lina, you're intrigued or... curious?"

"Cats are that, Eddie."

His eyes gleamed with understanding.

"You've been to Kittlemeier."

"Yes."

"Well???" It was the same *Well???* I'd given him earlier. It meant spill—all the details—now.

"A catsuit. Leather."

"Is it getting warm in here? ...Black?"

"No. As you said, no panache. If I'm going to go black, what's the point in a costume at all? Any old catburgler getup would do."

"Well..."

"It's something uniquely me."

"When will you break it in?"

I paused, feeling that Cheshire grin creeping over my lips...

"Soon."

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*Remember she follows the law of her kind,  
And Instinct is neither wayward nor blind.  
Then think of her beautiful gliding form,  
Her tread that would scarcely crush a worm,  
And her soothing song by the winter fire,  
Soft as the dying throb of the lyre.*

—William Wordsworth

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CHAPTER 4

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*A cat's eyes are windows enabling us to see into another world.*

—Irish Legend  
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Young Woman Powdering Herself by George Seurat, circa 1889, I think. We spent a lot of time on it at the Sorbonne. Not because it's the last painting the artist completed, but because the professor lived near Passage de l'Elysée-des-Beaux-Arts where Seurat had lived with his mistress, the woman depicted in the painting.

The woman sits at her make-up mirror, powdering her face.

We studied the importance of roundness in the work: in her curves, hairdo, arms, breasts, and even the folds of her dress.

We studied the Pointillist technique that Seurat invented: dot of red, a dot of blue... Your eye will blend it into a purple more luminous than anything the artist could mix on his palette.

But what I remember most of the *Young Woman Powdering Herself* is her eyes. The way she looks into that mirror. There's a wistful melancholy there belied by this secret knowing half-smile.

It's a far cry from what I'm used to seeing in the looking glass:

Good morning, MirrorBitch! There will be none of your smug "I know best, I was right about the chocolate truffles" nonsense this morning. You will not wreck my glow. Because yesterday I *finished* cleaning out that damn closet. HA! The junk is pitched. The not-quite-pitchable junk is in a little box waiting to be Ebayed. And the rest of it is nicely packed in clearly-labeled boxes with a wide walkable *PATH* right down the center aisle to get to any clearly-labeled box you might want to get to. Got that, Miss "I know best, I was right about the skirted costume?" The Hellmouth is closed. It may not stay that way for long, but for now it is just a closet like any other. Stick that in your lofty "I know best, I was right about Batman" attitude and mmbrrrm phwuuum phoom mwum fwolg.

-spit-

Okay, it's hard to make a clear ultimatum while brushing your teeth. But this is the gal in the mirror I'm talking to and she knows well enough what I mean. I splash my face off with water and—it must be the angle or the light as I look up because, just for a split second, I remember another mirror long ago. That cramped little backroom at Kittlemeier's; it was cold for so early in October and he only had this tiny little space heater.

It wasn't my face looking out from that cloudy pockmarked mirror; it was a masked creature: proud, powerful and feline. And the leather, the costume, wrapped tight and purple against my skin, I felt it radiating through me—from the one point—Sensei taught that Ki is the life force, the living power in all living things. When we've got it

just right, when we're balanced and relaxed and focused, it flows through us, connecting us to the universe. *You will only thrive when you are allowed to be what you are.*

THIS is what I was.

Meow.

This is what I'd always been, what I am, and what I will always be.

Meow.

This was freedom and strength and sensuality. This was beauty and grace, confidence and certainty. This was the best of me. It was smarts and sass, elegance and wit. It tingled through me. It wasn't even blood rushing through my veins anymore, it was this *essence*, this living essence of freedom and purple and—cat.

I had to get out of there NOW—I had to hit the rooftops—I HAD TO—NOW. I could barely compose myself to speak to Kittlemeier, to play the part of an ordinary human being long enough to... to change back into my street clothes and pay the man and then... whew, pick up that parcel, brown paper tied with a string, that he'd wrapped the suit in. It was like handling a holy relic, the way a caveman must have handled that precious flint that made the mystical life-giving fire.

When I stepped out of the store the thought struck me: I couldn't hit the rooftops yet; it was still daylight. What was I thinking?

The answer came to me as I walked home: What had I been thinking in Kittlemeier's fitting room? I *wasn't* thinking; I was *drunk*. I'd just *channeled* something for the first time—something entirely new, entirely powerful, and, curiously, something that was entirely... ME?

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*They danced by the light of the moon.*

— The Owl & The Pussycat, Edward Lear

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October 10th—Train Station—New Moon

Gotham Central Station was built in 1913 on the site of the old EGL Depot when the East Gotham Line, under the management of one Michael Wayne, joined with the Hudson Railroad. Accommodating a vast network of rail lines, terminal activities, and upwards of 400,000 people a day, the station is considered one of the great buildings in America. It is a triumph of innovative engineering combined with distinguished architecture. The main facade is a symphony of classical arches filled in with steel and glass. It is all topped by a huge clock and sculpture group—slightly reminiscent, to my eye, of the figures atop the Medici Tomb in Florence. Inside, the Main Concourse spans beneath a ceiling vault 125 feet across, painted with the constellations of the zodiac.

At the time I'd left for Europe, the Station was threatened with demolition, to make way for an office building, I think. Some preservation league or other had galvanized to save it. They succeeded, getting it protected as an historic landmark, and a spectacular \$400 million renovation was begun. It was just being completed when I returned from Europe. The party formally unveiling the renovations—complete with restaurants, retail shops, and a new art gallery—was that night, the night I'd picked up my costume from Kittlemeier.

Now, there seems to be some cosmic law at work in Gotham City: Any city shindig that takes place, the big shots are bound to step in it somehow. In this case, Police Commissioner Forsythe and District Attorney Harvey Dent were so proud of the wonderful security firm they'd hired for the art gallery, Foster Protection Services, they had publicly declared it was *impossible* for anyone to steal something.

Heh, amazing isn't it. Like waving a red flag in front of a bull. Like painting a target on your forehead. Like... challenging a cat to a hissing contest. Impossible for anyone to steal something? What a perfect occasion for my costumed debut.

The party itself was uninteresting. Bruce was there, it turned out, but he'd left before I arrived. He left before almost anyone arrived. Someone called Brandi Sue. Harvey's date... At the time, of course, I didn't know and didn't care. It was just some society gossip from a badly dressed newlywed called Ashton-Larraby. But in the years that followed, I heard the story from both of the principal players. This was the earliest days of the playboy pose for Bruce, and it seems that he and his good pal Harvey had an unofficial contest going: not who could score the most, but who could score most with the other's dates... These are supposed to be the good guys, remember. *I'm* the bad girl. Go figure.

In the course of the evening, I was able to familiarize myself with the layout of the place and stash myself in Ashton Hall off the Main Concourse. I waited with feline patience for the party to break up and then for the sounds of the clean-up crew to go quiet. At last I was free to change into the costume and emerge from my hiding place.

The first thing I did was stretch. It wasn't an intentionally feline act; it was instinct. It was cramped in there. Now that I was free, my limbs wanted to move and extend every which way. It felt wonderful. It felt incredibly wonderful—the catsuit, the mask—God what a rush. I hadn't touched a thing yet; this was just the *SUIT!* I felt connected to everything, to the space, the art on the walls, to my own movements, most especially I felt connected to the Night.

As expected, Foster Protection Service's "bold new approach" to security amounted to nothing more than locking the doors. The locks they somehow imagined were better than anyone else's were... meow... not an obstacle. Nor were the security cameras... find the wire, snip, snip... who knew the claws would be so useful?

I quickly selected which piece to take, a gouache by the artist who'd done the murals for the renovation, and looked for the easiest exit. This part of the building had rows of long arching windows near the ceiling that let in spectacular shafts of godlight in the daytime. They were certainly large enough to fit the painting through, and by now I was comfortable with the idea of moving over rooftops. So I removed the protective grate, opened the pane and slid myself out, intending to reach back in for the painting.

The first thing I noticed was the shadows were wrong.

I spun, startled, and saw... an awful lot of black. It was night, and yet this tall patch of blackness was darker than any of the regular dark around it.

I've never known how to describe what I experienced in that moment. I sometimes think that some part of us, down deep in the primal core, is psychic. They say racial memory can make us quake at thunder because it terrorized our earliest cave-dwelling ancestors. In the same way, I think something inside of us knows, can instinctively sense, when we first glimpse something that will be a huge part of our lives. It was a

disquieting feeling. Not fear, and not dislike of this patch of dark night before me, but... something... something strangely... inexplicably... unsettling. I've never known how to describe it.

What *caused* the feeling I can describe just fine. It took only a split second for my eyes to adjust to the blackness, and the form at the heart of that darkness took shape:

It was a man...

...perhaps six feet tall...

...about 200 lbs...

...with an aura of penetrating intensity...

...and a body like mortal sin.

Then a growling voice that matched the aura. Pure piercing intensity:

"I don't think that's an exit."

"Batman, I presume?"

I was smiling and hoped that it came through in my voice, as I'm sure it couldn't be *seen* through the darkness. I so wanted to be different from the riffraff spreading those stories about him, the street scum that cowered and panicked at the sight of this... *man*... this man who was most definitely, as Eddie had assured me, not an apparition.

He said nothing, nor did he move. But something shifted. What I felt then I've come to recognize as the sixth sense. His eyes were moving over my form just as mine had moved over his.

Since he declined to acknowledge my greeting, I saw no need to continue the introductions. I took a new tack, keeping my tone calm and poised, with just a hint of amused purr:

"Obviously it *is* an exit of sorts, since I just came *out of it*."

There was a pause. I guessed that wasn't what he expected. Banter was new to him.

"Breaking and entering is a crime in this city."

I hadn't broken in; I'd entered as an invited guest. But that seemed tedious to go into, and I certainly didn't want to be boring so...

"Got any law against exiting?"

Grunt. I liked the sound of it. I *really* did.

"Considering that you were 'exiting' from the new art gallery, I'm willing to bet you weren't just 'viewing.'"

"You're a bit of a tightass, aren't you. Funny none of the tall tales about you mentioned that."

He paused again. I guess nobody'd ever called him a tightass before.

"Theft is a crime in this city. You break the law here and you deal with me."

I laughed. He seemed very attached to that stodgy "*_Blank_ is a crime in this city*" formula. I couldn't think why.

He stepped forward, growling.

"Something funny?"

Now we were getting somewhere. He had moved—it was only a step but it was in the right direction—towards me. I looked him up and down expectantly: "Is this it? Do you fly or anything, or just... *grunt* and *snarl*." I let the sexiest purr I could manage simmer under the final words.

"What I do is stop people like you..." Now that he was closer, he was noticing more of the outfit. I felt his flashing glances, taking it all in, in the half-second before he added "...Whatever you are."

"What I am... is Catwoman."

"No, what you are—" The son of a bitch grabbed my wrist! "—is a criminal."

I hissed, let fly with the hand he didn't hold, and dug claw into cheekflesh. That loosened his grasp and I pulled my wrist free. I took a step back, eyes blazing.

"You like to get... *physical* don't you," I said.

Grunt. And he felt the cheek.

"Alright, *Catwoman*... we can do this the easy way... or the hard way."

He crouched into a defensive stance. Our eyes met... deep blue.

"Why Batman, how hard do you want it to get?"

Deep blue. As intense as the voice.

When he crouched into his defensive stance, I had sighed into one mirroring him. The eye contact was automatic after that, from the martial arts training, it's what you do just at the opening bow.

That's what I remember most from that first meeting: our eyes locking. Penetrating intensity. The deepest blue. Meow. I was in his eyes at that moment, that's how I could see it:

"Why Batman, how hard do you want it to get?"

Rattle. Falter. Mental sweat drop.

And then—and only then—after the longest pause yet, that voice again, the deepest, rumbling gravel...

"This isn't a game."

I shook my head, disappointed...

...and somersaulted off the roof...

...hoping...

... at a later date...

...he could keep up his end of the conversation.

... .. :: Batman's Log: 10, October ::

First run-in with new player tonight. Called herself "Catwoman." Another in the growing list of "themed" criminals plaguing this city — though unlike any of the others I've seen thus far, and not just because she's a woman. More... playful? Unabashedly unafraid. Brazen.

I approached too early. Suspect had not retrieved stolen items yet. Confronted her anyway — still not certain why. Instead of running or screaming, she replied in sly, cunning verbal retorts. A game of words? I'll admit I'm not used to "banter." It threw me off. There was certainly a strange attraction there — that outfit that looked like she'd been poured into it... She was definitely one of the most incredible women I've ever met — so confident, so straightforward. It's... alluring.

But I cannot allow that. I'm sure that's what she was going for - using her raw sexuality to catch me off guard. I won't let it. I can't. This quest is too important to let something as trivial as a sly wink or a curvaceous form distract me from doing what is necessary. I cannot allow these personal thoughts to interfere. Ever.

-Batman, Log Entry, October 10

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*Most cats do not approach humans recklessly. The possibility of concealed weapons, clods or sticks, tend to make them reserved. Much ceremony must be observed, and a number of diplomatic feelers put out, before establishing a state of truce.*

-Lloyd Alexander

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October 30th—Train Station—Waxing Crescent Moon

When it was built, Gotham Central Station cost \$43 million—that would be \$43 million in 1913 dollars. They defrayed some of the cost by selling the air rights at the first opportunity. There are several skyscrapers built around it that for years powered their elevators from the third rail current. Among those buildings are the world famous Excelsior Towers.

Soaring above the streets of one of Gotham's most fashionable neighborhoods, the Excelsior is "an elegant boutique hotel that also offers an extraordinary array of luxurious permanent residences for some for the world's most illustrious figures, from former first ladies to world-renowned composers and entertainers." There were plenty of reasons for Catwoman to take an interest in it, and those reasons had nothing to do with its proximity to the train station and that first encounter with Batman.

The place was lousy with rich guests: Jewelry galore, plus the permanent residents all customized their suites with their own artwork and baubles. I had plenty of reasons to be there that had nothing to do with Batman.

I did.

If you stopped and thought about it, there was no reason to think I was any more likely to encounter him in that area than in any other part of town. If there had been, it would have been foolish of me to go back.

And if I *was* a bit intrigued by the man, it was only the novelty factor. And that would pass all the more quickly the sooner we met a few more times and got used to it. There was a novelty to it, I would admit. Other men babbled: your eyes, your body, your this, your that, you make me feel, you make me want, yadda, yadda, yadda, so many words that say so very little. But this man, a soft guttural puff and I was undone.

...

Not *undone*, it was just... different...

It was memorable. Days later, I was still thinking about him. It. I was thinking about the encounter, not him, he just happened to be there.

But that is not why I hit the Excelsior towers.

“That’s far enough, Catwoman.”

He was waiting. When I’d climbed down from the towers onto the train station roof he was *standing there*... He had *watched me come down*.

I was pissed. More at myself than at him, I can see that now. I was pissed because it was stupid to return to that area so soon. I was pissed because he’d *surprised* me... and I was pissed because it wasn’t an unpleasant surprise.

I guess maybe he was a little pissed too. If he was, that explains how it turned so physical so quickly.

“It’s never far enough,” was all I remember getting out before leaping to kick him backwards. He caught his footing quickly enough, but the move gave me time to drop my goody bag. It’s a bit of an encumbrance in a fight, which is why I soon added a strap I could fasten to my wrist or waist.

Batman lunged at me. I stepped into the attack, forcing contact before he was ready, redirecting his momentum to throw his mass past me. He rolled with a twist, springing up to face me and I could see the white shock of recognition: *She knows what she’s doing*.

His surprise irked me even more. And I had a realization of my own: this was easy. The more he pissed me off, the easier it got. All the uncertainties of why I was there dissolved away in the fighting. It was SO easy.

He came at me again and managed to grab a shoulder. There was a heat in the contact, and I knew—I just knew—he was as excited by the physicality as I was.

“You’re better than you look,” I murmured when he was close enough, “which is saying something.”

He spun me around, right hand still latched onto my left shoulder so his arm was around my neck as he stood behind me, chest to my back.

“I’m better than you; that’s all that matters.”

I pressed back against him, the little gaps of cold winter air between us crushed into a sensation of warm velvety leather.

“Don’t be so sure,” I whispered before flipping him neatly onto his back.

I could have kicked him while he was down and run like hell. It was dangerous to stay. It was dangerous to get closer, but I was reluctant to let it end so quickly. I told myself I stayed because he was holding back, and that I couldn’t allow.

I pointed the toe of my boot and caressed his chest with the tip.

“You’re holding back. That’s my job. This is cat and mouse, after all.”

“Why are you doing this?” he whispered. His voice was so low, but not menacing—and not weak either. Despite his position on the ground, he was far from defeated. I couldn’t tell what he was going for. Did he mean why was I playing with him like the flying mouse he declared himself to be or...

“Why do you steal?”

Oh.

That was disappointing. He meant the theft not the game. He’d asked Eddie something similar, I remembered. Disappointing.

I moved the foot to his side, adjusting the other so I straddled him at the waist and bent over, leaning in close to impart the secret of secrets:

“Meowwwwwww,” I whispered, just as low as he had spoken.

He kicked up into a fighting stance that sent me flying backwards—without much force—and I easily shoulder-rolled to my feet.

“Still holding back,” I snarled. And I admit I was on the verge of losing my temper, “Such an accommodating mouse...” I couldn’t describe the flurry of punching, clawing, kicking and ouch that followed. All I could tell you is this: I did, in fact, lose my temper.

“...but I told you...” Claw. Scratch. Block. Hiss. “...that’s my job.” And then a really, *really* vicious flying double-leg kick until...

“...And my job...” Grunt, punch, choke. “...is to put you down!”

The force with which my back hit the ground certainly meant he was done holding back, but I took no consolation in it at the time.

He was hovering over me, basically pressing me down with his forearm.

“It’s over,” he graveled, “we’re done.”

But it wasn’t his voice that struck me then, it was his breathing. Calm. Slow. A little *too* calm and slow. Controlled. He was pouring everything he had into hiding the exertion; he was pouring everything he had into not breathing hard as he bent on top of me, perspiring under that mask no doubt just as I was, and hovering just over me while holding me down this way.

In contrast, I let myself... pant... I let my head tip back and my chest rise and fall with each hard breath as I lay on my back with this Batman bending over me...

“No darlin’,” I heaved through labored breaths, “just because you’re done...” arm into position behind his boot “...doesn’t mean I am,” and BOOM!

I didn’t see how hard he hit the floor, all I cared about was that he didn’t land on me. By the time he got up, I had a marginal headstart. He was faster and more persistent than I expected: rooftop to rooftop—rooftop to alley—alley to rooftop to alley to roof... and still he kept coming. Eventually I did lose him—or so I thought. Then I caught movement coming at me from the side! Son of a bitch, how did he do that?

I dodged, he rolled, and that should have been the end of it—but then—whooshing sound, something bit my wrist, and the loot bag went flying.

I couldn’t risk stopping to retrieve it. I’d taken too many risks already. But I’d learned my lesson; there was some consolation in that.

... .. :: Batman’s Log: 30, October ::

Another run-in with the “Catwoman.” She had stolen some valuables from the Excelsior, room 34G (Galveston, Mr. & Mrs. Roger A.) Intercepted on roof of the Train Station. Considering relative proximity to last encounter, it’s possible she lives in the area, but probably not. Strikes me as too intelligent to be stealing from her backyard.

Fighting ensued. She’s good. Really good. Judo, Aikido, Kempo - a mixed bag of styles and abilities. I held back at the start - primarily to focus on her styles and gauge her as an opponent. Plus, I was a bit wary of striking back - not because she was a woman per se. It was more of... she seemed to be more than that. The fighting and her abilities were so obviously a part of her, and yet at the same time it seemed as though she was somehow

above all of that - like it was entertainment for her but not necessary. Interesting dichotomy.

Suspect escaped and I pursued. She moved across the rooftops with precision and ease (Gymnast? Aerialist?) It's like she knows them as well as I do (Maybe she does live there?). While I get around via rooftop for ease of travel and better vantage points, I am unused to actual pursuit up there. Once I realized that direct pursuit would not work, I attempted a flanking maneuver, which she dodged. Suspect evaded capture, but I was able to recover stolen property (Note: check weight distribution on new Bat-arangs) and return to owners.

- Batman, Log Entry, October 30

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*When I play with my cat, who knows but that she regards me more as a plaything than I do her?* —Michel de Montaigne

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I told MirrorBitch quite distinctly that I would take no nonsense this morning. And yet the moment I step out of the shower, I detect that sly "I was right" lurking just under the surface. It's there while I towel off my hair and I have a pretty fair hunch it will only grow bolder if I remain.

I'm not sure what she has to crow about at the moment. I haven't had any weird dreams lately. Not that I remember my dreams, as a rule, but she's definitely got that look. That look like when I *am* having dreams that, whether I remember them or not, just go to prove her point.

It doesn't matter. This time of year if I don't style my hair, it'll frizz. And after conquering the Hellmouth Closet, I'm not going to be intimidated by the gal in the mirror—and I'm certainly not going to go around with air-dry frizzy hair because MirrorBitch thinks she's in a position to strut.

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*A cat doesn't know what it wants and wants more of it.*

—Richard Hexem

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November 3rd—Gotham Museum of Art—First Quarter Moon

Museum Row is a lovely stretch along Fifth Avenue chock full of museums and other fine arts institutions. The largest by far is the Gotham Museum of Art, taking up a full city block between the avenue and Robinson Park. The collection is vast and encyclopedic, said to contain over two million pieces with masterworks in every known medium, from every part of the world, spanning five thousand years.

I've become familiar with most of the public and private areas over the years, but my first visits were invariably to the Egyptian Wing. Egyptians and cats, how could I resist.

The idea of a "theme crime" was new to me. It was one thing to wear the outfit and call myself Catwoman. It was quite another to deliberately seek out cat-objects worth the taking... In a way, I thought I might feel silly. And in a way, it seemed counterproductive. Surely once I'd declared myself to be Catwoman, the mysterious Batman would know cat-related thefts were a likely target for me. He could be staking out places with a cat tie-in waiting for me.

It was definitely more dangerous than hitting a bank vault or a private condo.

Definitely.

Everyone knows the Egyptians worshipped cats, but few people know why. Egypt was the breadbasket of the ancient world. Their wealth, power, and survival depended on the storage of grain. Mice eat grain. Cats kill mice. Yay, cats!

The Museum's Egyptian collection is huge, including a full-scale temple that was shipped to America as a gift. I had visited this display that afternoon and selected the piece I wanted. A necklace of Princess Sit-hathor-yunet, 12th Dynasty, cloisonné pectoral inlaid with carefully cut pieces of semiprecious stones. The jewelry worn by royal women during the Middle Kingdom wasn't for simple adornment; it was symbolic of ideals and myths surrounding Egyptian royalty. Jewelry imbued a woman with superhuman powers and thus enabled her to fulfill her duties as part of a ruling family. This particular piece depicted the coming together of the male cat, representing the powers of the sun, and the female cat, harnessing the powers of the moon. What a magnificent prize for the Catwoman!

Sure, there was a little more risk of running into Batman. But didn't such a treasure balance a little extra risk?

I was bent over working on the pressure panels in the base of the display. I hadn't seen many of these in Europe, but it was solvable; it would just take a little extra time. I was jazzed. The expertise from Sean and Paris, refined in Italy, add the suit, it had all been leading to this. It was all coming together. And I almost had the panels disconnected when—

"The museum closed five hours ago."

Buzzkill.

I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of another startled spin, so I stood up—slowly—and turned... more... slowly... still.

"Really?" I said sweetly once I'd completed the move. "I always think of those 'Hours of Operation' as suggestions."

"The laws against burglary are not *suggestions*, Catwoman."

I noticed something odd. He was holding his head at a funny angle, pointing it to the space just right of me. It didn't look natural. It looked like he had a crick in his neck or... ohmygod... I got it. I'd been so accustomed to Frenchmen and Italians that don't bother hiding it that I was only discovering the maneuver since returning to Gotham: American men overcompensate when they've been looking.

I nearly laughed at the realization: I'd been bent over to reach the controls under the base of the display and this Batman was checking out my bod.

So I purred—and that really messed with him. I took a few steps forward. I didn't want to get too close, but I wanted to give him an eyeful of hipsway. Unless I'm very much mistaken, it was appreciated.

"I tell you what," I said warmly, "the night is young. I'm sure there are plenty of other burglaries in progress out there you can get your jollies messing with between now and sunrise. Why don't we pretend you never wandered in here—"

"No chance."

"—in here tonight and were not, in fact, lurking there in the shadows watching my ass."

"..."

I cocked my head at a pretty 'asking a favor' angle.

"You're a thief and I'm taking you down."

I stood my ground—and surprise—he didn't step forward this time as he had before on the roof.

"Take me down? Not on your best day, Handsome." Since he wouldn't step forward, I did. He didn't step back though, and his eyes burned like he wanted to hit me. "But it might be fun if you tried."

His whole jaw seemed to solidify somehow—no movement, but it somehow looked DENSER than before—and with a frightening economy of movement that flashed by too quickly to register he had grabbed my wrists—both this time—and his grip was harder than before.

Very hard.

A weakness.

I had him. I HAD HIM. He was too good not to know a tight grip was exploitable. He wasn't thinking clearly, he was reacting emotionally. I HAD HIM.

I tested it. I smiled seductively and wet my lips... and felt his grip tighten even more.

I looked into the deep blue eyes... and it tightened harder still.

Then I snarled, swinging into a Heaven-Earth move, one wrist down and outward, the other up and back while I stepped forward, forcing him off balance as his hands couldn't help but be pulled along for the ride. It wasn't necessary, but an extra hiss of hot breath into his face broke his focus even more before I flipped and dropped him at my feet. It also wasn't necessary to crash down on the back of his shoulderblade with my knee, but I felt like a chase and didn't want another one of those bat-Frisbees tripping me up.

"Don't do that again," I told him.

It was the third time this masked menace had kept me from my prize. I vowed right then there would not be a fourth.

... .. :: Batman's Log: 03, November ::

Catwoman. The Sit-hathor-yunet necklace. I prevented the theft, but she eluded capture. Again. I cannot allow this to keep happening. I cannot allow her to keep getting to me. At first it seemed almost an afterthought - her harmless (and ineffective) attempts at coercing her way to freedom. But

tonight was more. Much more. It wasn't light flirting, it was overtly sexual - brazen advances to distract and misdirect. She's not averse to using her raw sexuality as a weapon.

This cannot continue. Tonight, I was unprepared for this type of warfare. But now that I know what lengths she will go to, I know what lengths I have to reach to stop her.

She *will not* get away again.

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*Female cats are very lascivious and make advances to the male.*

—Aristotle

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December 18th—Cartier's—Full Moon

No one could say Gotham City invented Christmas, but it did invent the Christmas Shopping Season. Thanksgiving morning, the giant balloons and marching bands make their way down Broadway to 34th Street, the dancers from the musicals do their number in front of the grandstand and the television cameras, and when that last float reaches Mayfield's front door, every kid in the city knows Santa is in residence at the world's most famous department store. The next day, the flag drops on the official holiday shopping season. But lest you think it's all about money, the curtain also rises on the spectacle of the shop windows.

The stores expecting to make the most obscene sums will hide their merchandise entirely, turning their windows into elaborate tableaux of artsy, whimsy, or quaint.

Cartier outdoes them all; they wrap up their entire building with a big red bow.

They had gift wrapped themselves! How could I resist?

The Cartier building isn't that tall. It was once a private home, the Fifth Avenue mansion of one Morton F. Plant, well-known banker and yachtsman. The jewelers acquired it in one of the more unusual real estate transactions in Gotham's history. It was a trade: the building in exchange for a million dollar necklace Mrs. Plant coveted.

Anyway, it's not that tall. I lowered myself to the roof from the bank next door. I had only started to examine the electrical and ventilation panels I could access from there, when I felt that curious tingle again. It was stronger this time, and it felt different. It felt like *him*. It felt like... all that intensity that poured out from him... all focused on me. It was quite, quite, exciting.

It felt like Christmas morning. He was around somewhere... and he was watching me... and we were going to have another encounter.

Meow.

I went to work in earnest. Fortunately, Cartier-Gotham uses a Phoenix, the same alarm system as Cartier-Paris. I defeated it quickly. Showing off a little? Sure, why not. Cats are not shy about displaying their talents.

Once inside, I found my way through the maze of small galleries and salons to the main vault. I had to concentrate on cracking it and couldn't worry about the tingle. When at last I got it open, I saw an ideal piece for fencing purposes, it was a "dog

collar" type of necklace, an absolute eyesore, studded in rubies. It was exactly the type of piece my Italian contacts would break down into a half dozen exquisite bracelets.

On an impulse, I picked up a pair of earrings as well, sapphire petals around a diamond center. These would not be broken down into anything; they were exquisite just as they were.

As I returned through the ventilation duct to the roof, I was thinking about keeping the earrings, the dark of the sapphires would work well with the dark of my hair and...

"Those jewels don't belong to you."

...I had forgotten about the tingle and what it meant...

"You're going to jail for taking them."

...what I assumed it meant...

"But first—"

...Him. And I was right; it did mean him. It did mean he was watching. It did mean all that intensity that radiated off him was fully focused on me.

"—you're going to put them back."

All that intensity... I couldn't help but wonder... What would it be like?

"Never had a cat, did you?"

Defensive stance, but no words. No response of any kind. Like he's a robot.

"Cats don't take orders," I told him simply. I meant about putting the stuff back, but he stood up from his defensive pose. I guess he thought I was refusing to 'fight on cue'—which in a way, I suppose I was.

He still wasn't saying anything, but the mood changed. He seemed... calmer, less edgy. I was too. It would happen often in the coming years: however I'd planned to be the next time I saw him, however I geared up to make sure this time would be different, once we were together, it started to evaporate. The longer we were together—talking, not talking, fighting, flirting—the more all that resolve broke down into this easy state of... whatever it was.

The mask brought something out in me—the suit did so even more—and being with him in the mask and catsuit, not just being Catwoman but being Catwoman *with him*, it evoked something deeper still. It was so natural, so effortless; this part of me just... happened, when I was with him.

I don't remember taking a single step forward, but I must have because I was standing right in front of him. My arms lifted with a will of their own and settled around his neck.

"It's a foolish girl who waits for Santa," I said.

In my mind I truly thought I meant the jewels. We were standing on top of a jewelry store wrapped up like a giant Christmas present. He'd told me to put back the things I'd taken, and I said it's a foolish girl who waits for Santa. But even then some part of me knew the truth: It was a part of me that I was taking, this magical part of me that he somehow sparked into being. I wasn't waiting for Santa; I wasn't waiting like some heroine in a romance novel for the tall, dark stranger to make a gift of these feelings he evoked in me, I was *taking* it, I was claiming this for my own.

"Just this once," I murmured, "you could..." ...look the other way? Is that what I'd started to say? I'll never know, because when I got there, his lips that had been pursed so tightly parted just a hair, and the next words never came.

“Just this once, you could...” he said softly.

...could what? Leave without the jewels or... My head tilted and I stretched upward, closing the distance between us. He never pulled back, not a millimeter, but he made me come almost the whole way myself. Then at the last moment he leaned in, causing our lips to collide with more force than I'd intended. What should have begun so softly, the gentle, tentative moments of a first kiss were jolted unexpectedly into the future. We were kissing like lovers. There was an angular crisp taste, with just the tiniest trace of round sweetness all but lost in a piquant steam of spice and ginger and flint. And there was this sense of taking what I wanted, just as I'd intended, but in doing so I was giving it as well. I was letting him share in this wild, free, unexpected part of me... He was taking something too, and giving, something so private and intimate, that one moment.

There was a noise from deep in my throat. I had purred. I'd used the word before to describe my voice when I thought it was enticing, but I never knew what it meant. I never knew what it was to really emote satisfaction that way, to vibrate pleasure out from the core.

He pulled back. I think the sound startled him—a shocked reminder of what I was—and he pushed me away.

“Just this once,” I repeated.

That was it. I left the jewel bag there. And he didn't pursue me.

That's how it started. Batman and Catwoman. Our first rooftop.

He doesn't understand why that was our first time. Hard to believe, isn't it.

Men are so literal.

Even Batman.

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*Women and cats will do as they please, and men and dogs should relax and get used to the idea.* —Robert A. Heinlein

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Blowdry and curling iron go quite well. MirrorBitch holds her peace. It's when I lean in to start my makeup that I see it. It's in the eyes. Something... strangely knowing.

If this weren't my own reflection, I would swear she thinks she knows something I don't. But it *IS* my reflection, and that's just not possible outside of Arkham.

I set down the makeup brush and look MirrorBitch in the eye.

“Well?”

Well.

She certainly knows something. Which means I know something. The closet is done. It wasn't so bad. It wasn't so *good* either, but I got through it. Still. I cleaned out a closet full of junk, that's it; it's not what you'd call a learning experience. Even if I did let myself look back a little, even if I have been thinking more about the past—I mean really, at the end of all that rigmarole, what was the point of it all?

It's called self-knowledge, Kitten.

How I hate it when that inner voice sounds like him.

There better be more to it than “self-knowledge kitten.” Did looking back to see how I got here help me understand myself any more than I did before? Does that understanding help me understand anyone or anything else any better? And why was I so reluctant to get into it in the first place? There were some bad memories, sure. And some good ones. I was missing out on both. Why? Was it just because, deep down, I knew there was something not quite right in stealing and, if I started peeling back the layers, then sooner or later I’d have to face up to the fact that...

Oh.

Hell.

Oh Hell.

Fucking bloody Hell.

It’s one thing to stop stealing. My circumstances changed and it made life easier to not be stealing anymore.

It is another thing entirely to admit...

It’s another thing entirely to admit...

It is another thing entirely to admit it was wrong.

It’s another thing entirely to admit it hurts to have things taken from you, that the people I stole from were hurt because of what I did... and I didn’t care. Because of all I lost, I didn’t see it. Because of all the hurt I felt, I wouldn’t let myself see it.

Denial. One of the stages I skipped over when they died. Denial and Anger.

And Bargaining: if I got back enough of the material comforts, maybe it would fill that void.

An amethyst teardrop. Catwoman Purple.

It’s all connected. That is the point of all this. It’s all connected.

I am *Catwoman*, not The Cat. The woman is part of the equation. The human is part of the equation. Batman is part of the equation. Cartier was our first rooftop because of what we took from each other and what we gave to each other.

Sensei was right, I couldn’t thrive until I was allowed to be what I am.

It is all connected.

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*A cat has absolute emotional honesty: human beings, for one reason or another, may hide their feelings, but a cat does not.*

—Ernest Hemingway

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ClipClip and the mug was set down next to him. Then the fingers worked the muscles at the back of his neck.

"How was your night?"

Grunt.

"Busy?"

"Not yet. Soon. Ivy, Catman, Joker, Nigma, all about to be released from Arkham."

"Ah, well then, calm before the storm?"

Grunt.

The massage stopped and Selina leaned against the desk beside him where she could see his face. The sly catsmile telegraphed her mood right before she looked pointedly at the computer screen.

"Section deleted?"

She had seen it. Damn her.

"You've been thinking on it too," he said.

"Yes." She sounded so amused, what was so funny? "'Section deleted?' You're still a tightass."

Another grunt—not disapproval or even acknowledgement, but an ingrained response. After a pause, he said "And you're still brazen and playful."

"Oh, was that my billing? Here I thought I was 'section deleted.'"

"I rest my case. Playful. And brazen."

She bent down and purred low in his ear, "You have no idea."

"So... I take it the closet is clean?"

She looked at him strangely. It was... it was a look he'd seen a thousand times, a thousand nights as he lay in bed thinking about a moment—the look that came at him out of darkness during a strained pause on a long ago rooftop—the look that came right after 'how hard do you want it to get?'

"You're still a tightass," she said with amused affection, "and you still can't return a serve."

The corner of his mouth twitched slightly and he reached out, grabbing her arm and pulling her down into his lap. His fingertips touched her hair, then stroked down the side of her face, slipped round her neck, and pulled her in for a long, tender kiss. Then he touched her face again, wonderingly, moving his fingers along the top of the cheek where the mask once began.

"Selina... did you find what you were looking for?"

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*Charles Dickens's favorite feline companion was known simply as "The Master's Cat." When the hour grew late, and the cat determined Mr. Dickens had toiled long enough over *Oliver Twist* or *David Copperfield*, the little cat would snuff out with its paw the candle that lit the author's desk. Dickens acknowledged the hint and happily complied with a cuddle for his favorite cat.*

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