



Armchair Detective

by Chris Dee

*"On a catwalk? My haven't we changed."*

*"And you. From mere theft to terrorist blackmail..."*

If it wasn't the worst moment of my life, I'd be hard-pressed to say what was. That mechanized monstrosity of a costume, everyone assumed he was just overcompensating after the Bane injury. There was no reason to think it wasn't still Batman under the mask. Not until that moment. Not until he accused me of stealing nerve gas for terrorists.

At first, I only knew it was wrong, that he was wrong, but I couldn't grasp the totality of it, not in those first seconds. Then, a few words later, a few steps closer, and...

*"That's close enough."*

*"You're right. Close enough to realize you're not him."*

The real Batman would never fear my approach. But in retrospect, I guess Azrael was right to. Because as soon as I got close, I could feel it. Batman is warm and alive, raging with desire and purpose. This thing was sterile. The waves of intensity that pulse and pound off the real Batman were gone, and in their place, there was only a hollow, nervous dumb-show. If it wasn't the worst moment of my life... And now I was living it again, over and over, like some poetic Twilight Zone hell where you're trapped in the worst night of your life for all eternity.

Okay, technically, it was seventeen minutes, but it felt like an eternity and then some. The Batmobile can make it from midtown to Wayne Manor in fourteen minutes flat, but the Lamborghini isn't the Batmobile, and I was further downtown and six blocks from the car when the call came in...

I had resisted the OraCom for the longest time. It seemed so "Team Batman." But then, on my birthday, Dick and Barbara gave me this little, purple velvet box. They couldn't seem to control their smiling; it was like Joker had just passed through with a SmileX sampler platter. I opened the box, and these three silver cats looked up at me: earrings and a necklace. Dick was Mr. Technical, explaining that the earrings held the earpiece (no kidding) and the necklace had a powerful directional microphone (which could also be removed and clipped to the side of my mask, if I preferred). Barbara just said that "Girls need some style", and even if it wasn't dangerous for Catwoman to be running around with an obvious bat device, it would still be ludicrous to expect me to use a comlink shaped like a bat. I was too stunned to even speak, at first, which Barbara might have taken as disapproval, because she hastily added that my link was just like Batman's in one very important respect: she wouldn't be able to track it. And then Dick came over and kissed my cheek, said "welcome to the family", and, well, that's how Team Batman finally got a collar around my neck.

So now I have an OraCom, and that night I was satisfying a cat's professional curiosity about the security for a silk Tabriz rug the Saudi royal family is selling at Sotheby's, when the unit went off.

...:Catwoman, you're going to want to proceed home, ASAP;:... came this eerily detached voice that I wouldn't even have recognized as Barbara's if I didn't already know.

...:B is down. I'm sorry I don't have any details, other than he's in the Batmobile and it's operating on autopilot;:...

I'm sure I said something, but I have absolutely no memory of it. All I know is that the cool monotone of calm, super-human professionalism answered ...ETA at the cave in 4.2 minutes. We'll know more then....

I had just made it back to the car when the line crackled to life again:

...:Breathe, Selina. He's alive and he's going to stay that way. Alfred says it's his back:...

It was meant as a comfort, and I suppose it was. "He's alive and he's going to stay that way." But I didn't feel relief. I couldn't seem to feel anything. Just those words "it's his back" hanging in the air like plague in some sweltering Karachi port of a hundred years ago.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I couldn't feel. I'm not completely sure how I managed to drive. All I know is that, somewhere in my head, the part of my brain that once struggled to process Batman being Bruce Wayne was only now making the acquaintance of another part of my psyche, the part of me that encountered "AzBat" that night.

"From mere theft to terrorist blackmail..."

The Batman I knew would never have thought such a thing. The Batman I knew was not in that costume. The Batman I knew must have been badly hurt by Bane. The Batman I knew... was Bruce.

It was incredible. After all this time, there was still one small piece of my past with Batman that hadn't made the adjustment now that "Batman" had a name and a face. But there it was: the man I thought I'd lost that night, the man who—let's get real—who I loved whether I'd admit it to myself or not, the man who Bane had hurt or even killed for all I knew at that moment, was Bruce.

Officially, the Lamborghini has a maximum speed of 350 kilometers or 217.5 miles per hour, just 4.5 short of the Batmobile. After the last turn off Country Club Drive onto the Wayne property, I discovered it can actually go 218.3.

I did something I've never done before. I bypassed the turn towards the garage and went straight into the Batcave. The bats in the hangar had a hissy fit, but they stayed out of my way as I ran to the med lab.

Alfred didn't. He intercepted me a few feet from the door, and frankly, I consider it a triumph of self-control that I didn't flatten him where he stood and keep right on going. I had to see Bruce, and I couldn't seem to make him understand that. He just kept going on and on about how unfortunate it was that Miss Oracle had contacted me when and how she did. He would have much preferred to inform me himself, and had intended to as soon as he had a free moment to do so. He was, naturally, occupied with his patient in those first minutes after the Batmobile arrived in the cave, and by the time he was at liberty to speak to me himself, it was, of course, too late. He apologized that Miss Oracle's incomplete information had so needlessly exacerbated my fears.

There's nothing like Alfred Pennyworth's scrupulous formality to make you feel like a hysterical drama queen making a crisis out of a cat's paw. I would have given just about anything to be able to toss my hair and answer flawless formality with careless felinity... but I couldn't. It was the Batcave, his Batcave. I didn't even know existed back then, and now I was standing in it. I couldn't manage carefree felinity. All I

could do was ask if I could see him, and hope I didn't sound as meek and needy to Alfred's ear as I did in mine.



Oliver Lyon glanced over the dismal sales reports for Organic Life, Natural Living, and Herbal Monthly, and the equally dismal projections based on quarterly sales. Then he turned his attention to the sales figures for *Supple*, *Fashionista*, and *Gotham Swank*... always the stars. Thirty-five magazines made up his publishing empire, and every month it was the same three at the top and the same three on the bottom. The media kept talking about these new social trends: environmental awareness and economic downturns moving Americans away from the old bling towards a healthier, more modest, and eco-friendly lifestyle... If it was true, you certainly couldn't prove it by their reading habits. He could cancel Organic Life and those other losers and never see so much as a blip on the summary income statement.

But in Gotham there were considerations beyond the bottom line. Years ago he was advised that, given the amount of paper Lyon Publishing consumed, he would be wise to keep a few "green power" titles going, no matter what. It was the best insurance against Poison Ivy singling him out to be made an example.

Oliver gathered up his reports, but then paused before sliding them into his briefcase. Was there any point in his bringing work home? Tomorrow morning, they'd be packing up their things and driving out to the vacation house. He was used to it being a big three-day ordeal when they were moving out to Watermill Lodge for the summer. It was like packing up an army, especially when the kids were young. But this was a simple house party: a day or two to set up, a long weekend with their guests, and leave the staff to close the place up. It really shouldn't be a big deal. But it was going to be. With Noel, there was no such thing as a "simple" house party. He was sure she'd be packing enough clothes for a month. "Have to have options!" she'd say.

Well, what did he expect? She had been the fashion editor for Gotham Swank when he met her, and before that, she was a model. Three outfits per day (and three "options" for each) went with the territory.

He paused again, looking down at the papers. There was no way he'd have a chance to get any work done, not until the whole thing was over, but it might be worthwhile to bring the paperwork anyway, just to have it handy as a prop. With Noel, Fiona, and Gracie all under one roof, he might need an escape.

"Have to have options!" as Noel would say.



Alfred said that Bruce had regained consciousness shortly after the Batmobile returned to the cave, but that he'd administered a painkiller and he doubted Bruce would still be awake. I didn't care. I still had visions of AzBat dancing in my head. I needed to see Bruce. I needed to touch his cheek and hold his hand and send Azrael the Imposter back to the shadows, a sickening memory of what never should have been.

I entered the med lab flanked by ghosts: the Catwoman of that other lifetime on my right, the Batman she once fought on my left, and the armored monster that took his place trailing a few steps behind.

"There you are," a groggy voice murmured—and just like that, the ghosts were gone. All he had to do was speak.

"I thought I heard voices out there," Bruce said weakly. "Then thought maybe imagined it. The shot... tend to imagine..."

I walked over to the bed and stroked his hair a few times.

"I like to think when your imagination conjures me, it can do better than this," I purred.

For just a second, one of the ghosts returned, but he wasn't standing beside me. The Ghost of Batman Past flickered ever so briefly in Bruce's eyes—crystal clear, dark and penetrating, sexy as hell—some sort of deep-seeded reaction to the suggestive taunt, I suppose. That hypnotic intensity blazed for a second, then glazed over again.

"Well, you are a bit overdressed," he murmured.

I bent over and kissed him. I whispered a few of the old promises in his ear as he drifted off, hoping to seed the right sort of dreams, and then I turned towards the door.

It's a kind of natural arch that separates the med lab from the main cavern, and I turned knowing that as sure as the sun rises in the east and as sure as there will always be an England, there was going to be a pot of tea waiting for me on the other side.

I had turned knowing I was going to see Alfred coming at me with the inevitable tray, pot and cups, milk and sugar. And they were there all right, but in between, my eye caught something else. Something wrong. It took a second to register anything more, but then it came in a flash: color—green—green color!

The wastebasket just inside the med lab arch was heaped with little bits of vine and leaves.



"Oh no, my dear. No, no, no," Richard Flay cried.

He clicked his tongue and waved his fingertips in a seizure of disapproval as he walked out of the antique shop. Nicola Dulch smiled apologetically at the owner as she raced after him. She caught up with him at the corner, but only because he'd stopped at a newsstand to pick up the new *Art and Antiques*.

"Richard, that was terribly rude," she scolded. "How am I to show my face in there again, when they know I brought you expressly to—"

"You shouldn't go back. Ever. The painting's a fake, and not a very good one. Catherine de Medici died in 1589. Yet the buttons on her dress are cerulean blue, which has only been around since 1805. The beads in her hair are lemon yellow, 1809, and the dress itself is chrome yellow, 1818."

"Well, that is disappointing, but it's no reason to insult them. They didn't paint it."

"Nicola, my dear, you asked for my opinion, and I agreed to come down here and give it—in exchange for lunch at 21. If you want me to be polite as well (and to the would-be peddlers of a mediocre forgery, no less), then the price would be dinner at *Maison de Pierre* with at least two bottles of my choosing from the premium wine list."

"I'm not made of money, Richard. If I agreed to that, I'd have nothing left to buy the painting!"

"Then I'm afraid you shall have to take me as I am, or find another expert to save you from ruin."

It took the entire walk to the 21 Club and a half bottle of '96 Latour to get Richard Flay past the affront of a poorly executed forgery and back to the charming lunch companion he usually was.

"So, my dear, sex and violence," he said at last, eyes gleaming with the promise of gossip and scandal. "We meet this weekend at the Watermill Lodge, don't we, for the big house party?"

"Oh yes," Nicola said. "I think I was the first one outside the family to be invited."

"You are family," Richard insisted, consulting his infallible memory of who in Old Gotham society was related to whom, and beginning to arrange the facts as he often did after a few glasses of Chateau Latour. "You and Elizabeth were second cousins on your mother's side, but you couldn't be a bridesmaid when she married Oliver because you had, um... Was it chicken pox? Or was it the semester abroad, Paris or somewhere? Well anyway, you weren't there. Then, when Fiona was born, you were her godmother, and when Elizabeth died, you were appointed co-trustee for Fiona's trust fund, along with Oliver, of course. Let me see, what else? Oh yes, once he married Noel, you sponsored her for the Junior League and the Garden Club, which was generally accepted as the first family's stamp of approval on the second wife. Did I leave anything out?"

Nicola picked up the wine bottle and checked the label.

"What's in this stuff? You seem to know my life story better than I do. Quick, what's my favorite color?"

"Turquoise," Richard Flay said sagely. "I've been meaning to speak to you about those atrocious pillows you bought at the Snavely auction. But seriously, I can't take much credit. I was over at Oliver's townhouse just last week and your name came up. What with Fiona's birthday in a few months and turning over the trust."

"Ah, that's why my ears were burning. So what were you doing at Oliver's talking about Fiona's trust fund?"

"Oh, that had nothing to do with my visit. Oliver only wanted my opinion on those Miros they have on the stairs. He was wondering if they should be reappraised. It has been twenty years."

"Reappraised?" Nicola asked sharply.

"Yes," Richard said, surprised by the vehemence in her tone.

"Why would he want to do that? Why would someone reappraise artworks they've had for twenty years?"

"Oh... Well, there are many possible reasons," Richard stalled. He was uncomfortable with the shift in the conversation. What had begun as light gossip about a mutual friend seemed to be drifting into pointed and indelicate probing.

Richard Flay hardly saw his position giving art advice to his friends as a sacred trust conferring priest/penitent confidentiality, but he was aware that a collection is an extremely personal undertaking. He didn't like speculating what a purchase or sale might mean about a collector's private life. He only considered the artwork itself: its

technical merits and provenance, whether it was representative of the artist or period, and its function in the greater context of a collection.

As for personal matters, well... one could glean a great deal, he supposed, if one had a sordid mind. There were pieces a collector would never part with unless he was in dire financial need. There were pieces that had to be valued for a divorce settlement or liquidated to settle an estate. And of course, for some, there were shadow collections. He himself owned six pieces which were, technically, not the lawful property of those he bought them from. Those who owned stolen artworks enjoyed them privately. They didn't show them even to a fine art consigliere like Richard Flay. But owning stolen art had given him a kind of sixth sense about others who did. He could guess with a fair degree of certainty who had a hidden room in their manor with a guilty secret or three hanging on their walls.



"It was predictable."

That was Bruce's summary the next morning. I made Alfred wake me early so I could be the one to bring Bruce his breakfast. In between bites of a lemon poppyseed scone, he explained how he's used to working through events as he writes them up in his logs. Since he wasn't going to be able to do that any time soon, he'd accomplish the same thing by telling me.

Honest to God, that's how he put it. 20 mg of Oxycontin in his system, unable to walk fifteen feet to his workstation, but he'd worked out a way to get "all the psycho-analytical benefits of making a log entry, if not the archival ones".

Upside, I got to hear the whole story.

Downside, I got to hear the whole story:

"After all Ivy did to help get Harvey back, she felt entitled to have whatever happened next to go exactly the way she wanted. She expected to be made happy."

"Ivy is never happy," I pointed out, and Bruce grimaced.

"It's not a strong predilection in her nature, I agree. Nevertheless, she expected it. And evidently, sending Harvey away for treatment, far, far from Gotham..."

"And far, far from her..."

"Exactly. The goddess is displeased, and rather than simply adapt: get on a plane and go visit him, she has to assign blame and take it out on whoever she deems responsible."

"You."

"Me. When rogues don't get what they want, it's usually me. Like I said, it was thoroughly predictable."

"If it was so predictable, why didn't you predict it?" I asked.

I have to admit, it was an effort. The teasing and sass usually come so naturally, but the scare of the night before was still too vivid. I would have been happy to give Catwoman the day off, to just crawl into the medi-bed beside him and spend the day purring in his ear. But he didn't need a purring kitten. He needed Catwoman pawing at the bat toy, just like always. So paw I did:

"So tell me, oh Great Detective who understands the minds of his enemies so completely, if this one was so easy to see coming, why didn't you—"

"I did," he grveled. "I was prepared for an attack. I've been dosing with anti-tox, I've kept the utility belt stocked with a variety of fast-acting herbicides, I went into the Wedgewood knowing it was almost certainly a trap and that Ivy was probably the one behind it."

I felt this warm, wonderful tingle the moment he said "I did". Just like all those years ago when he showed up on that rooftop to take down the imposter and reclaim his mantle. This was the first gravel I'd heard since he was hurt, and it meant the same thing as that wonderful old costume on that long ago rooftop: Batman was back.

"The only thing I couldn't foresee was that damned flytrap getting around my belt the way it did, and those vines coiling around my leg in that exact way at that exact moment, so when the boiler blew..." He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Your body went one way while your legs went the other," I said softly.

"Yes... Goddamn it, yes... After Bane, I modified the batsuit, added support and padding on the lower back. But no amount of reinforcement, no design, can anticipate every possible angle of every possible—DAMNIT!"

He slammed his fist down on the bed, and then winced at the effort. The move had jostled his plate and a little bite of scone had fallen to the ground. Now one of the bats—as heedless of his tempers as any cat would be—was venturing into the med lab to eat it.

A few hours later, the bat would be back for a ham sandwich. By then, Alfred had taken an x-ray and sent it to Dr. Thompkins. She confirmed his diagnosis: Bruce's injury was "just a bad wrench", but it was a bad wrench near the L4 vertebrae. That's when the plate with the ham sandwich flew, when he heard the wrench was just below the disc that had swollen so badly after Bane's "back breaker" maneuver.

No one outside the Bat-Family, including me, had ever heard what really happened back then. Alfred told me now that Bruce had suffered a minor fracture to his L3 vertebrae and a massive herniation to the L3-L4 disc, none of which is good but none of it is crippling. Except the latter released "inflammatory chemical mediators" that caused the disc to swell until it pressed into the spinal column, causing temporary paralysis from the waist down.

With a history like that, Bruce wasn't going to take chances. It's probably the one injury he won't shrug off and work through. Alfred said he had to rest it completely for four to five weeks, Dr. Thompkins said he had to rest it completely for five to seven weeks, and (after the obligatory "DAMNIT" that sent the ham sandwich to the floor), he agreed to five weeks in the easy chair.



Fredrick Donohue, Jr. walked hurriedly through d'Annunzio's dining room, embarrassment tinting his cheeks until he reached Fiona's table.

"Well, I just made a total ass of myself. I thought the reservation would be in your name. I asked for Lyon, and Giovanni says 'Like-a your sister? There must be a mistake again taking the reservation. Here I thought she was eating with you, and I already sit her at your table.' He was going nuts rearranging his reservations before I could settle him down."

"Half-sister," Fiona said archly. "And I don't like using my name here because the last time I did, Giovanni thought I was Noel. 'Mrs. Lyon,' I could just vomit."

Rick sighed.

"You know, she is my mother, Fiona. I know you hate her, it isn't necessary to remind me every single time an opportunity presents itself."

"It was my dad's birthday, Rick. Our special lunch, just the two of us. I called ahead and made sure there was a cake. And what do I get? 'Mrs. Lyon.' I can't wait 'til I turn twenty-one. Get my trust fund and get away from all of you."

"I always thought we got along okay," Rick grinned.

"We did until you went and proposed to Gracie the gorgon. This weekend is going to be hell, Rick, and it's all your fault."

"I don't get it. 'Gracie the gorgon.' Why does everybody hate her, Fiona?"

"You know, in all the time I've been coming here, I never tried the shrimp arrabbiata."

"Only thing you and mom have ever agreed on."

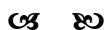
"I'm pretty sure 'arrabbiata' means angry. Angry shrimp."

"You don't know how lucky you are, Fiona. The trust fund from your mother is untouchable. You can say anything you want, do anything you want, marry anyone you want. You turn twenty-one and it's yours, whether Oliver likes it or not. I'm completely at my mother's mercy. And she does not like Gracie. Neither do you, and I'd just like to know why."

"Must be from the chili peppers. Such a good bite, I'll bet it's great with shrimp."

"Fiona, come on! I just don't see why you're all so down on her. My whole family and half my friends, nobody likes her but me. Why is that?"

"I'm not going to answer that, Rick. Because despite what you might think, a couple million nailed down tight in a trust fund does not mean that I can say anything to anybody without consequences. But I'm sure if you think about it for a while, you'll figure it out all by yourself."



Will Foley was not the only six-foot white man to know his way around Chinatown. He wasn't the only blonde-haired, blue-eyed twenty-something to find his way past the tourist herb shops with romantic names like "Eastern Spring Elixirs" to the authentic ones like Ho Shou Wu.

He was only unique in what he bought there. He didn't want xiong huang cream like most of the athletic white men who somehow got the idea that the salve contained steroids that wouldn't be detected in drug tests. He didn't want yin yang huo, the horny goat weed, or dong chong xia cao. He didn't want any of the aphrodisiacs. Instead he bought red panaax araliaceae, ma huang, wu wei zi, an mian pian, and suan zao ren. Every week.

Today, he added chang bai ciwuja to the order.

"You sure?" Mr. Wo asked. "The extract is very strong. Give you quite a headache if you're not used to it."

"I'm sure," came the stoic reply.



"Yes, I know, you'd be so much happier chasing Ratcatcher through a stinking sewer, but instead you have to endure your favorite Schubert, fig and sandalwood incense, and a full body massage from a topless slave girl. I'm really not sure how you'll be able to bear it."

"I'll manage," he grveled. "But it will have to wait until you get back. In case you've forgotten, we're expected at Watermill Lodge this weekend."

"I assumed we'd be cancelling," I told him.

"I'm cancelling, I can't move. 'Freak accident on the racquetball court.' You're fine. You still need to go."

"I 'need' to go? C'mon, Bruce, 'fess up. This isn't social obligation talking; no amount of painkiller and anti-inflammatories is going to turn you into Mrs. Ashton-Larraby. What's really going on?"

There was the same flash in his eyes that I saw the night before: crystal clear, dark and penetrating, sexy as hell. It was Batman sitting there, Batman wearing a Bruce Wayne suit... Batman sitting there lying to me:

"It is a social obligation. I only know Oliver and Noel slightly, but this party is announcing and celebrating an engagement. It's a very special event. We said we'd be there, and one of us still can be."

I crossed my legs, licked my lips, and felt a warm, delicious tingle. He was lying all right, and maybe another woman would be offended by that. But I am not another woman.

Batman and I have played games before. He wanted me at that party, but instead of coming out and saying so, he was pretending it was Bruce Wayne who wanted me to go. Instead of just coming out and telling me why Batman needed me to be there, he was pretending it was some social duty I had to perform as the acting Mrs. Wayne.

I like playing games with Batman. Right now he was lying and I knew he was lying. But did he know that I knew he was lying?

I couldn't tell, so I meowed.

"Then I guess I better go upstairs and pack."



The Wayne family had erected their manor on the choicest lot on the vast property. The house was perfectly situated to look out over the burgeoning city across the river. In those days, the city didn't glisten with artificial light as it did now, the Night-Gotham gradually coming into focus like a gleaming jewel as the sky around it darkened. It was a sight Batman seldom saw. He was usually in the cave by now, preparing for the night ahead, or sometimes he was in the city, arranging Bruce Wayne's alibi through some public appearance with a beautiful but shallow bimbo.

Back then, at least. There were no bimbos since Selina. It was being in his room at sunset that reminded him of that earlier time. Those first weeks after the Bane injury, that was the only time in his life that he saw this particular view of the city at this time of day. As if the memories were linked, the pain in his back grew worse, just as it always did back then. This time of day, the dawn of night, when he should be in the cave getting into costume... The pain had always grown worse then, and it grew worse now. In his mind's ear, Alfred suggested he take a pain pill and settle in for the night, and in his mind's ear, he heard his venomous, snarling refusal. How badly he had treated Alfred back then.

He should never have sent Selina away. It was a mistake. She was the biggest difference in his life since that earlier time, and her presence alone would have warded off this flood of unwelcome memories. Her sudden absence made them all the sharper.

Once again, his inner-Alfred suggested a pain pill and sleep, and this time, he acquiesced. He settled on the bed and shut his eyes, willing the old memories to stay in their cages, and taking refuge, as he had back then, with a conjured Cat on a long ago rooftop. Once again, he had hesitated when he shouldn't. She had *made him* hesitate, somehow, and he still couldn't nail down exactly how she did it. Over and over again, that one woman—that one criminal—somehow managed to break his focus. To break it, play with it for a while like it was her own personal ball of yarn, and then hand back the broken pieces with that damnable "Aren't I a naughty girl" grin. Once again, it led to his giving her an opening twice as long as a fighter of her skill needed, and once again, she had gotten away with her prize. Once again, he was left with that lingering scent in his nostrils: lavender and vanilla mingled with leather and musk, and a hint of tearose whenever her hair flitted past his face. Once again, he had to track that damnable cat thief back to her lair to try to recover stolen property rather than preventing the theft in the first place. Once again, typing those words into the logs: Catwoman. My enemy. My equal. Who brought a fire to my lips that Bruce Wayne's bimbos never came close to ringing... ringing...

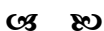
Bruce started, his eyes snapping open, instantly alert. Ringing. Selina's ring.

He had to stretch to reach his phone, and pain shot like fire from his shoulder to his lower back, burning through the last wisps of sleep.

*...: Didn't wake you, did I? I wanted to say goodnight. ...*

"No, no" Bruce lied, double-checking that the line had been secured before adding, "Bats are nocturnal. How's the houseparty?"

*...: Woof. You've got me holed up with the cast of a Fellini film, Bruce. These people are seriously strange... ...*



Richard Flay was the only one of the houseguests I knew beyond “Hi, hello.” It was to be a weekend of parties and amusements, with loads of extra people expected for a garden party on Saturday, clam bake Saturday night, and a barbecue on Sunday. But Friday night was a formal dinner just for those of us staying at the house.

Nobody had a chance to talk much during the afternoon arrivals. The son and daughter, Rick and Fiona, went off to play tennis, while his fiancée, Gracie, went for a swim. For the rest of us, the afternoon was all about seeing to the luggage and settling into rooms. I’d taken the Lamborghini, and this good-looking young man who carried my bags couldn’t take his eyes off it. I think his hand actually trembled when he touched the door to get my suitcase. He lingered once he’d brought the bags to my room, and I knew he wanted to ask about it. I was patiently waiting for him to work up his courage, but he never got past his name (which was William) because Richard Flay kept popping in: he couldn’t find his way back to his room, he needed more towels, he needed help reaching a high shelf, and so on.

Alone at last, I figured I had time for a shower before I had to dress for dinner. Unfortunately, Watermill Lodge is no Wayne Manor, and it seems there’s an odd little acoustic quirk with the plumbing. Standing in the shower, I could hear conversation in the next room. No actual words, but the pitch and tone came through loud and clear. It was a man and a woman having a pretty nasty-sounding fight. I was going to ignore it, but then the word “whore” jumped out quite distinctly from the otherwise unintelligible garbling.



Bruce smiled at the psychological point. Everyone has particular sights, sounds, and patterns that they key into. No matter how diverse or jumbled the sensory landscape, certain words, written or spoken, will be noted. Given Selina’s miserable history with F. Miller and the Gotham Post, it wasn’t surprising that her psyche would key into that word over others.

“The man’s voice, or the woman’s?” he asked mildly.

...: *Woman’s*, ... she answered



Kitty’s curiosity was piqued, and I decided that if I wasn’t going to spend dinner playing Guess The Combatants, it would be best to skip the shower and hear no more. So I threw on the cocktail dress I’d brought for the occasion: a pale yellow silk, sleeveless but no cleavage, nothing too sexy for this crowd. I added some simple gold earrings, ran a brush through my hair, and went down to dinner early... And was immediately foiled by my own good intentions. Just I stepped into the hall, I saw the door to the next room over open and Rick come out. Male voice identified. Now feline curiosity really wanted to know who the woman was that he was fighting with, and whom she was calling a whore.

Luckily, I wasn’t the only one who got downstairs early. Oliver was there, and he offered me a tour of the house. He asked about Bruce, of course, said what a pain those squash injuries can be, and mentioned running into him last month at his health club,

that kind of thing. He also said how relieved he was that I hadn't worn some big piece of Wayne heirloom jewelry, because Noel was a little afraid about being outshone.

"I'm sure that sounds silly to you," he said apologetically, "but Noel was a model, after all, and in her day she was called the most beautiful woman in the world. Now, she has a son old enough to be getting married. I'm sure she can be forgiven a few harmless vanities."

I agreed, and when Noel came down to dinner, I made a point of complimenting her necklace.



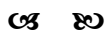
"What was it?" Bruce interrupted.

...:What was what?...

"Her necklace."

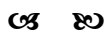
...:Oh, uh, white gold or platinum collar with a pinkish stone in the center, rose quartz or maybe pink tourmaline. ...

Bruce grunted.



The rest of the cocktail hour chitchat was taken up with introductions. The only person I didn't know at all was Daniel Eagan: late 30s, bit of a southern accent, nice looking if a bit too "pretty" for my taste. He said he was a professional poker player, but he said it like it was a joke. He seemed to know everybody, but he didn't seem to know anyone well. Just what his connection was to the family, why he was there or what he actually does for a living, I have no clue.

Dinner was pretty odd. It seems that Richard Flay's friend, Nicola Dulch, had played a little visit to the seating chart. Nothing was said openly, but I heard a few whispers. Gracie was the guest of honor, no surprise there; it was her engagement to Rick that the whole weekend was celebrating. She was to be seated at Oliver's right, and I had the second highest position on our host's left—which was certainly no compliment to *my* social status, but to Bruce's. If he was there, Bruce would have been seated in the opposite position at the other end of the table on Noel's left, but seeing as he wasn't, Nicola was asking if I could be booted down the chain a few places to let her have the seat next to Oliver. Noel didn't care (and I certainly wouldn't have minded if anyone had asked me), but Oliver evidently vetoed the idea. It made for a very strange prelude to a very strange meal.



...: Cream of edamame soup, an artichoke, lobster themador, endive salad, and crème brulee, ... Selina volunteered, simply to head of any more questions about irrelevancies like Noel's necklace.

Once again, Bruce grunted.



No butler, but there was a footman to do the serving. I heard Noel call him William and looked—sure enough, it was the same kid who bought up the luggage and couldn't take his eyes off the Lamborghini. Richard Flay couldn't take *his* eyes off

William. Nicola kept *her* eyes on Oliver the way I used to track a pair of emeralds through a party. And all I can say about the crosscurrents between Rick, Fiona and Gracie is that I've sat in the drawing room between Eddie and Bruce trapped in their day-faces, politely chatting about opera when all they both wanted was to put on some masks, step outside, and beat the living hell out of each other.

After dinner, Richard Flay appropriated me for an in-depth discussion of the MoMA's new exhibit (yet again, made possible by a generous grant from the Wayne Foundation), and I lost track of most of the others' movements. But I'm fairly sure Nicola finally cornered Oliver. The pair of them seemed to drift off in the general direction of his study, and it seemed like they were both missing for about twenty minutes. I never did see when Oliver returned, but Richard noticed when Nicola got back, and that she was quite ashen. He speculated that either the lobster or something she just heard about long-term investments in Bear Sterns wasn't settling very well.

He went off to talk to her, but I was only on my own for a second before Daniel Eagan appeared from nowhere. He gave off that vibe...



"What do you mean, 'that vibe'?" Bruce hissed.

...: *Oh come on, Bruce. You know very well what I mean. I never had the pleasure of tangling with the Fop personally, but from what I've heard, 'the vibe' was your specialty. If I was interested, he was ready, willing, and eager. ...*

"And he knows you're with me?" the menacing Bat-voice grveled.

...: *Technically, but I'm here alone, and I might be the sort that plays around....*

"Anything else?" Bruce asked darkly.

...: *As a matter of fact, yes. Seeing as I'm a guest here and spending the next three days under the same roof with this guy, I opted for evasive maneuvers rather than clawing. Landed me in this little alcove behind a set of French doors, where I found this note. 'F I have it. Bring the money.' Boathouse 9. ...*

He grunted.

"Since there aren't nine boathouses on the property, that presumably means 9 o'clock. Was it after nine when you found the note?"

...: *Yeah, much. It was nearly eleven. I can still go out to the boathouse and poke around if you want. Not like I need my beauty rest. ...*

Bruce considered this, but decided against it.

"No, not worthwhile at this point. Is there anything else unusual about the note?"

...: *Unusual? Bruce, it's a note. It wasn't left at the Batsignal and it's not asking the air-speed velocity of an African swallow. What qualifies as unusual? ...*

"The F," Bruce sighed. "Does it have a period after it, like an initial?"

...: *No, but the F is in the top left over the other words, like it's being addressed to "F". I think we can assume the initial is implied. ...*

"F. I have it. Bring the money. Boathouse 9," he recited.

...: *Actually, it's 'Bring' and then a dollar sign. 'the money' was my interpret—...*

"Don't," Bruce barked. "Don't interpret, don't theorize, don't think. Just give me the cold facts without any—"

...: *Bruce, are you ready to tell me what the hell I'm doing here? ...*

There was a long pause. Then, rather than answering, Bruce said:

"I miss you."

There was a longer pause, and then...

*...: So, this is pretty important stuff, eh? You want me there with you, lying next to you right now, in our bed, running my fingertips over your chest, right over the emblem, right over the scar, purring you to sleep, but instead, you've got me here playing 'lobster and lovenotes' with the cast of a Fellini film. ...*

Bruce closed his eyes and expelled a long, shuddering breath.

Breaking his focus. Pawing it like her own, personal ball of yarn. Then handing it back in pieces and expecting him to pick up where he'd left off like nothing at all had happened... How very little had changed.



Wayne Manor would always be home to Dick Grayson. He didn't call ahead and seldom bothered with the doorbell. But today, since his arms were full, he jostled boxes and pressed the button with his elbow—and then kicked himself for being so thoughtless. As soon as the door began to open, he started apologizing in a frenzied rush:

"Alfred, I am so sorry, I didn't think. I just thought 'hands full' and it never even occurred to me... You must have so much extra work right now, what with Bruce being laid up and everything. And all I had to do was set down the boxes and get my key—"

"Master Dick," Alfred beamed. "What a pleasure it is to welcome you home, young sir. Do come in. Here, let me help you with those parcels."

Dick jostled his boxes again but felt obligated to repeat his apology when Alfred reached out to help.

"Oh no, please, I can manage. I already put you to enough trouble."

"In ringing the doorbell, sir?"

Dick took a deep breath, and then explained:

"None of us did very well last time, Alfred—when Bruce got hurt, I mean. We let him push us away, and we never should have, no matter what he said. I know the weight of it all pretty much fell on you, and, well, Babs and I talked about it. If nothing else, this is a chance to make up for it a little. Babs went through all her favorite movies and picked out a bunch for Bruce to watch while he's laid up. Otherwise, we figure he'll probably just brood and read Dostoyevsky while Selina is gone. Or maybe back issues of the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin. But we're worried about you, too. Must be a lot more work for you."

Alfred could barely contain his emotion.

"Master Dick," he said warmly, "there is no greater mark of character than to acknowledge the errors of one's past, and then to go beyond simple acknowledgement or expressions of remorse, to actively making restitution. I am very proud of you, young sir."

Dick swallowed and blushed profusely.

"Well, eh..." he floundered helplessly, and Alfred quickly returned to the original conversation:

"As you say, Master Dick, there is certainly some variance in the household routine, but the additional work upstairs is offset by the suspension of the master's downstairs activities."

"Ah. Well, I'm going to be down there each night myself. I figured it's better if I work off Batman's at-large list and use his routines to design a patrol route. Will that make any more work for you? Because I could always use the satellite cave under the Wayne Tower and—"

"Not at all, sir. Will you be changing into costume here?"

"Yeah, I guess. But don't feel you need to do laundry or anything. I can always pick up a few days worth of clothes during the week and run them back home."

Alfred's glare expressed disapproval as vehement as his earlier approval.

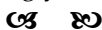
"It is best if you leave those considerations to me, Master Dick. Nightwing should simply make use of the cave's resources in whatever way you think best, and permit me to provide such support services as I deem necessary."

"Yessir," Dick said. He was seventeen again. Nightwing was years in the future, and he had just brought home a B-minus on his English test after Alfred spent so much time quizzing him on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

"Master Bruce is in his study," Alfred said mildly, picking up one of the boxes. "I am sure he will find this selection of films most diverting."

"Yes," Dick said, with renewed confidence. "Babs has good instincts for that kind of thing... Oh, and Alfred, I like to start patrol a little earlier than Bruce. Could you maybe have a little snack ready for me around 8 o'clock or so. Grilled cheese and maybe some fruit?"

"Very good, sir," Alfred said approvingly.



Bruce interlaced his fingers thoughtfully as Dick pulled DVD after DVD out of a cardboard box, consulted a slip from his pocket, and arranged them in little stacks on the desk.

"Looks like day three of your Babs-Flix marathon will be devoted to sizzling chemistry: *To Have and Have Not*, *The Big Sleep* and *Key Largo*. See what that 'Bogey and Bacall' thing was all about, I guess. The ways of the All-Seeing Oracle, they are mysterious."

"Not that mysterious," Bruce noted with a lip-twitch.

With Selina gone, he was alone as he had been after the Bane injury. "Sizzling chemistry" would remind him of the Cat and Bat as they had been, making him feel her absence more acutely. The next day she would return home, and he couldn't help but contrast his life then and now.

"Here's something interesting," Dick said, reading off his slip. "Wikipedia story Babs found on Lauren Bacall. They were doing her screen test, and she was nervous: only nineteen, big Hollywood studio, her first time before the cameras. So to minimize her quivering, she pressed her chin against her chest, and then she had to tilt her eyes upward to face the camera. Became known as 'The Look', smouldering hot and her special trademark. Just goes to show how what you *think* is happening can be so far off from what's *really* happening."

“What I think is happening,” Bruce said ominously, “is Superman was off world to rescue his father and then traveled into the future to help the Legion. Flash, Aquaman, and Martian Manhunter took turns covering his monitor duty, and he’s been paying them back for weeks taking over their shifts. He sits there, he’s got time on his hands, he gets bored, and he opens the Watchtower interface to the OraCom and starts chatting with Barbara. Intentionally or not, he taps into the inner matchmaker, and here we are.”

Dick started to object, when Alfred coughed from the doorway. He didn’t want to call Bruce “crazy paranoid” in front of Alfred, so Dick shifted his attention to the DVD case for *Key Largo*. Alfred came in with a telephone on a silver tray, announced that Miss Selina was calling from Watermill Lodge and that he had already secured the line. Dick took the DVD to the window as if he needed more light to read.

His maneuver to give Bruce a little privacy was wasted, for Bruce waved him back almost immediately and, after double-checking with Alfred that the line had been encrypted, he switched the phone to open speaker mode.

“Selina, say that again,” he ordered.

*...: Noel Lyon is dead;... came the crisp reply. ...: She didn’t come down to breakfast this morning. Oliver sent the maid up to check on her, and... well, the commotion is still in progress. But the hostess is dead, so I’d expect the party to be breaking up ASAP. Except for the immediate family, and maybe that cousin of hers if she’s staying for the funeral. So I’ll be ho—...*

“Stop. Back up. You’re not going anywhere until we know more.”

“How did she die?” Dick mouthed silently, but Bruce shook his head dismissively. He had other priorities:

“Selina, go to Noel’s room. Stay inside the house if you possibly can, but do whatever you need to in order to get there without being seen.”

There was a pause.

“Do it!” Bruce barked.

Another pause, and then...

*...: I’ll call you back. ...*



Tense minutes passed. Alfred’s attention flickered around the study, the impulse to “tidy” providing an excuse to stay and hear more.

“I don’t get it,” Dick was saying. “Item one: ascertain the cause of death. ‘Cause if it’s nothing suspicious and this woman just keeled over from a heart attack or something, then sending Selina to snoop is—”

“The death *is* suspicious,” Bruce said tersely. “Anything happening around Oliver Lyon right now is suspicious. And time is the enemy. We’ll find out how Noel died soon enough, that isn’t going to change. But anything in that bedroom can—and no doubt will—change within the hour, and I need Selina there before it does.”

The three men stared at each other until the phone rang again.

“Selina?” Bruce barked.

...: *Uh, no. Not quite,...* Barbara's cool Oracle voice replied. ...: *I've got her on the OraCom. She said it's easier than juggling the cell phone right now, and you would understand why. So turn it on. I've got her on channel four....*

Bruce dropped his head into his hand and massaged his brow while Dick pulled his com unit from his breast pocket.

"Here we go," he breathed, plugging it into the phone speaker. "Selina on the OraCom. Who knew she'd actually use it, eh Bruce?" He smiled, and Bruce glared. "Eh, okay, channel four," he ended lamely.

...: *Hello?* ... Selina whispered.

"We read you," Bruce said formally. "Go on."

...: *Uh, well, she's laying here. ...*

"What's the bed situation look like?" Bruce asked. "Does it look like she shares the room with her husband? Or separate bedrooms?"

"You can't ask her that?" Dick hissed, smacking Bruce's shoulder lightly in a flurry of indignation, and Bruce quickly muted the speaker before replying.

"She's Catwoman, Dick. She's not squeamish about poking through other people's private things."

...: *Separate bedrooms, ...* the speaker announced in Selina's hushed whisper. ...: *Bed and nightstands told the tale, but I checked the bathroom to confirm it. Definitely separate bedrooms....*

"All right. Now check the safe," Bruce said, releasing the mute button.

...: ... ..

"There should be a fairly spectacular diamond in there."

...: ... ..

"A necklace, I believe."

...: ... ..

"Selina?"

...: *You do understand that there's a dead woman lying here at my feet, right? ...*

"You do understand it's Batman telling you to break into a safe and paw someone else's property?"

...: ... ..

Dick stared openmouthed as Bruce scowled at the telephone, counting down from three with his fingers. Then:

...: *I'll call you back. ...*



The safe was only a JSR mini with a digital lock, so it's not like it took all my concentration. I had plenty of free braincells to focus on the fact that I had let Bruce send me into this crazy house as an agent of the Bat. I had plenty of free braincells to point out that I was practically stepping over a dead woman to open a safe simply because he said so... and plenty of others to remind me that (grunt) he was Batman. Batman directly and unambiguously telling me to open up someone else's safe is quite a turn on and the one form of catnip this kitty can never pass by...

But I still hate following orders. He gets that tone that just assumes you're going to do whatever he wants, and... well, that's as far as I got when the pathetic little JRS digital gave up the fight and swung open to reveal its secrets.



...: *It's a fake...*

"What do you mean it's a fake?"

...: *Does 'fake' have some other meaning I'm not familiar with? Bruce, it's a fake. She's only got one necklace in here. It's the one she wore to dinner last night....*

"The one you said was a rose quartz?"

...: *Well, it's not like I put it under a jeweler's loop. I couldn't get that close then, and a stone this size you don't exactly assume 'diamond'. But I'm close now, and if it was real, yeah, totally with you: 'fairly spectacular' would be the mot juste. But it's not real. It's moi-shit, someone's coming... ...*

The men listening in the study waited in silence for a moment, then Dick asked:

"Moissshit?"

"Moissanite," Bruce grveled. "A diamond substitute like cubic zirconium, but it wears better, maintaining its clarity and color in a way that CZ cannot. If it's cut well, with a faceted girdle, its brilliance is indistinguishable from a real diamond."

"Yeah, but these people don't need to buy a fake, right? I mean, Lyon Publishing, they're in your league."

"That's not the pertinent question," Bruce said, his eyes locked on the com link. "Ask yourself what the true incongruity is with respect to that necklace?"

...: *Bruce? ... the speaker hissed. ...: That footman came into the room just now. Y'know, William, the kid who carried my bags. He just snuck in here and was rummaging around Noel's exercise machine. I think he took a bottle or something with him. ...*

"You THINK?"

...: *I'm on a ledge outside the window, Stud. I don't have the best line of sight on — ...*

"You're on a ledge?"

...: *Not a lot of options here. It's not like I can fit in the vents. It was this or the closet... oh shit, here comes another one. ...*

Once again, the line went quiet. Dick knit his brow, and then pointed to the com link.

"Selina. She's the incongruity. If someone named *Lyon*, as in 'sounds like LION', had a 'fairly spectacular' diamond, then Catwoman should know about it. She certainly wouldn't be assuming a stone that size must be rose quartz."

"Correct," Bruce nodded curtly.

Dick studied his mentor: he seemed grimly satisfied with Dick's reasoning, and Dick couldn't help but wonder if Bruce was even aware of the new variable this line of thought introduced.

"Do you think it was a good idea to make her put her fingerprints on it?"

"What?" Bruce said, the word coming out as a softly expelled breath as he looked up sharply.

"Her fingerprints, Bruce. I doubt she's running around that house in costume. You make her go to a dead woman's bedroom while the body is still warm, crack her safe and feel up her 'fairly spectacular' diamond?"

There was a long pause, and then...

"Selina is a professional. I'm sure she's taken all necessary precautions."

"She's a pro at what she does, not at what we do. And she's acting as your eyes and ears right now. I wouldn't count on her viewing it as a Catwoman operation."

"..."

"Bruce?"

"I'm sure she's taken all necessary precautions," Bruce repeated.

...: *Christ, you've got me in the loony bin here, Bruce. You've landed me in fucking Arkham, you know that?...*

"What?" Bruce and Dick said in unison.

...: *Get this, first that William kid comes in, fishes around the exercise machine and takes away a bottle of something. Then Gracie comes in. Y'know, the fiancée? She just snuck in and went around the whole damn room, looking behind every painting. ...*

"She's looking for the safe," Dick noted.

...: *Well, duh. That's what people who just know wall safes from the movies think: gotta be hidden behind a big oil painting....*

"And Noel's is hidden where?" Bruce asked.

...: *Under the television. She's got one of those TV cabinets disguised as an armoire. TV on top, DVD and a speaker underneath. Speaker is the safe....*

"So this Gracie didn't find it?" Dick asked.

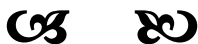
...: *Nope. She didn't get to finish looking. Oliver and Fiona came in with the undertaker. He took the body, and Oliver left with him. Fiona stayed behind. Take a wild flying guess what she did....*

"Checked behind an oil painting for the safe?" Dick said.

"No," Bruce shook his head. "She searched around the exercise machine, looking for something but not finding it. Because William the footman had already found it and taken it away."

...: *It is seriously creepy how you do that, ...* Selina noted.

"What she said," Dick agreed.



“Cassie, cars do not have body language.”

It sounded better in Dick’s ears than “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” but it meant pretty much the same thing. Bruce needed experienced crimefighters in the vicinity of Watermill Lodge; he understood that. Cassie needed to learn how to drive; he understood that. He didn’t think combining the two into his riding up to Watermill Lodge with Cassie while she drove the car was such a hot idea. And he especially didn’t think “killing two birds with one stone” was the most tasteful way to phrase it, no matter how much pain Bruce was in or how frustrated he was stuck in that armchair.

Dick had faced enough life-threatening dangers as Robin, and far too often the villain of the hour had pulled that “killing two birds” quip. It wasn’t funny the first time, but by the sixteenth, he had really had enough. Time had passed, sure, but he would always dislike the phrase. Killing birds was bad enough on its own...

“Cassie, that was our exit.”

“Was not.”

...but used in conjunction with the girl who could snap your neck without ever losing the 10-2 steering position...



...:Can I come home now?:... Selina asked plaintively.

Bruce heard Dick’s words echo in his mind’s ear: *She’s the best at what she does, not at what we do.* Robin or Nightwing would be locked into the investigative mindset by now. They would know instinctively what lay ahead, that the investigation was only beginning, and how it needed to proceed. But Selina... Selina was still in girlfriend-houseguest mode. Catwoman had done what he’d asked of her, but as soon as the task was complete, she was Selina again, thinking about coming home to him. Thinking about extracting herself from an unpleasant situation rather than digging in until she’d found out what had happened.

*She’s the best at what she does, not at what we do.*

She wouldn’t have left fingerprints, would she? Girlfriend-houseguest mode or not, it was Catwoman who opened the safe, and Catwoman must take all necessary precautions in her realm just as he did in his. After a while, it became as natural as breathing...

...:Bruce?:...

“No, you can’t come back yet,” the final, unchallengeable voice of the Bat decreed. “There’s too much we still need to find out, starting with that bottle that was taken. This is a murder, Catwoman, and since I can’t be there to investigate, you have to be my eyes and ears.”

**She is the best at what she does**, the same unassailable Bat-voice repeated in Bruce’s thoughts. **Catwoman does not simply forget herself and leave fingerprints on someone’s safe or jewelry.** If this had happened years ago, when Batman and Catwoman were what we used to be, wouldn’t I know that? If it was Batman investigating a suspicious death at Watermill Lodge and I found Catwoman’s fingerprints inside the safe, wouldn’t I know that it was a frame up? Wouldn’t I be so certain that I would immediately eliminate that fingerprint as a Holmesian

**impossibility and draw the obvious conclusion that remained: since Catwoman does not go around leaving fingerprints, this one must have been planted in order to implicate her in the crime.**

*...:Is this what you were expecting?...*

"I'm sorry?" he murmured, still lost in thought.

*...:When you sent me here, is this what you thought was going to happen?!:...*



*...:I didn't think it would be this big, :: Bruce answered. ...:but something.....*

He was still holding out on me, and I couldn't fathom why. I asked again for some kind of explanation: why he'd sent me to Watermill in the first place, what he knew, what he was expecting, something.

Something more than "go to the bedroom and don't be seen."

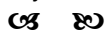
What do I get in reply? "No, not yet."

Insufferable jackass.

"No, not yet. First go to..."

I was getting really fed up. He said reinforcements were on the way. Dick would be following the actual body, and Cassie was bringing me a "bat-pack" (growl) with a miniature camera and a few other gadgets, and then she would "be on hand" for whatever either Dick or I needed. But in the meantime, I had to 1) check the wastebaskets in Noel's bedroom and bathroom for some clue as to what that bottle was that I'd seen William take away, and 2) if and when that search came up empty, I was to proceed to William's and Fiona's rooms and conduct similar searches.

If all three searches were unproductive, "it will have to be the household garbage", he said. (Needless to say, it will also have to be forty new acres for the Catitat made possible by a generous grant from the Wayne Foundation.)



"Cassie, I swear to God, cars do not have body language."

"Do. Green Corolla behind us nervous because semi behind it. If edge up any further, would be in our back seat."

"Cassie... Cassie I know I said give him some space but—Cassie, Cassie, speed limits are not suggestions, Cassie. You want to maybe—I think that was the toll plaza where we turned around last time. You... you can't just anticipate what they're going to do by watching for 'tells', okay? You have to be prepared for anything the red Honda might do when it reaches the intersection..."

"Honda no have tells; driver do. Driver control Honda. Honda drift left when he look over shoulder to merge."

"Like we should have. We're going the wrong way."

"Not."

"We're supposed to be going east."

"Going east."

"No, we're not. We need to turn around."

"Sun rise in east."





















































































