



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

#1

Cat Tales

A Girl's Gotta Protect Her Reputation



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES

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REPUTATION**

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A GIRL'S GOTTA PROTECT HER REPUTATION

"HAHAHAHAHA!"

It was my instant messenger. Riddler set this system up for the "villain community" to keep in touch. I thought it was silly then, and I think it's silly now. But Harvey convinced me to go along. Every few months, one of those nutjobs comes up with an idea to do something social. Usually it's Harley. Usually it's bowling.

I never go. I'm not a joiner. Harvey bugs me about it. He's probably my best friend among the Rogues Gallery, a big brother-type, but he can be a real pest sometimes. Several months ago he called me:

...: *You going to this Karaoke Happy Hour or not? ...*

"Oh yes, I long to hear Eddie Nigma and Ivy singing *You Don't Bring Me Flowers Anymore.*"

...: *You're getting a reputation, Selina. They're calling you a real prude. ...*

"Harvey, have you ever SEEN my costume?"

...: *Come, just for an hour. It'll be fun. ...*

"I don't want to. It's stupid. You just want me to come because you know it will be stupid and you're going to have a terrible time. So you want me there to have a terrible time with you."

...: *It'll be fun. If we didn't think so, why would we be going? ...*

"Cause the coin came up heads."

Shit, why did I say that?, I thought. The line was eerily silent.

"Harvey, I'm sorry, that was thoughtless and mean. You put me on the defensive—never a good idea—and I lashed out. I'm really sorry."

I waited.

...: *Y'know, Selina, you could make a bit of an effort to at least appear to be one of us. If there were half the stories about me and Batman as there are about you, I'd be very worried. ...*

I smiled—I hoped it would come through in my voice as I said, "Harvey, if there were *any* of the stories about you and Batman like there are about me, we'd *ALL* be worried."

He laughed. I was forgiven. But I was definitely on the hook for Karaoke Happy Hour. I went. I'll admit, it wasn't that bad. Hugo Strange was truly creepy. I figure he has a frequent-renter card at Sleezo-Video. In trying to avoid him, I wound up talking most of the night to Ed Nigma, who's actually a fairly interesting guy in his lucid moments. He doesn't have many of them, but something about Harley Quinn crooning *Don't Cry for Me Argentina* brought on a moment of clarity. So it wasn't

absolutely hell on earth, but it's nothing I'd want to make a habit of. That's why Harvey suggested going along with this IM idea.

...: *If you agree to a few of the little things,...* he said, ...: *it's easier to say no when they come up with something really obnoxious.* ...:

"More obnoxious than karaoke?"

...: *There was talk of you hosting Thanksgiving dinner.* ...:

"Okay, okay."

So I had this instant messenger on my desktop now. I knew it was only a matter of time before Batman found out and showed up on the channel. I dismissed the idea that that's why I installed it. Anyway, it was on my desktop and it was cackling: *HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!* Joker, obviously. I opened the dialogue window:

Catty, babe, what're you gonna do about this?

Catty? Babe? Who the hell did he think he's talking to?

A second line of text appeared:

That Carlton woman's got to be stopped, damnit. This is making us all look bad.

He was talking about Bronwyn Carlton, new reporter at the Gotham Post. Now the Post is a tabloid scandal sheet. The stories they print about Batman and the Rogues are *completely and utterly false* and everyone in the super-community knows it. 90% of everybody else knows it too. But when one of their libelous flights of fancy is appealing, everybody can make quite a distasteful show of *pretending* to believe it. That was the case when they printed a story that Batman and I were having a torrid affair (on the roof of police headquarters no less!), when they reported Nightwing was our love child (How old do these people think I am?) Oh, and my personal all-time favorite: that the time I helped the JLA with Prometheus, I just happened to be at the WatchTower because I wanted to try a zero-gravity three-way with Batman and Black Canary!

I typed...

Everyone knows the Post is a scandal rag, Jack. Or do you think Plastic Man is really Elvis?

But the things they're saying, Catty, you gotta protect your rep. fix this. no joke.

Pitied by the Joker.

This was serious.

The last time Jack spoke to me, he threatened to paste one of those deathsmiles on every cat in the city. He had just found out I had not really killed Batman as I'd told him when I dropped him at Arkham last year. What can I say; the clown has no sense of humor. Hee-hee.

And now he pitied me.

And it was all because Bronwyn Carlton and her chicks-behind-bars editor decided to name some (homely) Jane Doe in the county jail as "CATWOMAN CAPTURED!" They followed with a perfectly ludicrous series of articles about her arrest, abuse at the hands of the authorities, brainwashing by Harley Quinn (Harley Quinn? HARLEY QUINN?!?!? *HARLEY FUCKING QUINN!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*). And finally, a supposed interview with this fictitious Catwoman, including her confession to a number of

robberies that would have been absolutely beneath my dignity to bother with, for a payoff that wouldn't cover my tips.

I had decided to quietly ride out this ridiculous episode just like all the others. How bad could it be, right? Well, it wasn't *that* bad—until I ran into Batman on the roof of a brokerage house.

Usually old Tall, Dark and Spooky will open with something grandly pompous. This time he just stood there, staring. And the side of his mouth twitched in an odd way.

"I thought you were in jail," he said and his mouth did that weird twitch again. And I thought: *Oh Jesus, it's a SMILE. He's SMILING. He thinks this IS FUNNY!*

I was so stunned I just let him take the bag... bearer bonds... Didn't hiss. Didn't scratch. I know what you're thinking and you're right: I dropped the ball and I'm damn lucky he didn't slap the cuffs on me right then...

Shit.

It suddenly occurred to me: Batman reads the Post.

He'd never made any mention of those earlier stories and I guess I figured he hadn't seen them... Ho boy, I'll worry about that one tomorrow.

Problem was, after a stunt like CATWOMAN CAPTURED what do you do for a topper? Ol' Ms. Carlton and her editor discovered my name sells papers, so now, so said tonight's edition, I'd gone and shot Commissioner Gordon. Yeah, like if I had a loaded gun he'd really be the one lying in a pool of blood right now.

Jack was right, this Carlton woman did have to be stopped. I just needed to figure out how...

Like all well-trained butler/valets, Alfred Pennyworth ran a hot iron over the newspaper he placed each morning on his employer's breakfast tray. Laying down the tray on a bedside table, he then opened the curtains, ran a hot bath, and laid out appropriate clothing for the day ahead in a small dressing room adjacent to the bath. He then returned to the bedroom. If Bruce Wayne had arisen, he would wish his employer a good morning. If he had not, Alfred would pour the coffee and make relentlessly polite smalltalk until Bruce accepted the inevitable and got out of bed. This morning, on returning to the bedroom Alfred discovered that Bruce was indeed awake, had unfolded the aforementioned paper, poured his coffee, and spat a mouthful of it all over the Entertainment section. Still coughing, he was simultaneously trying to mop up the puddle with a napkin and read the soggy words beneath.

The incident was caused by a box labeled Stage Views right beneath the fold:

CATWOMAN PURRS

They say God writes lousy theatre. They haven't been to Off-Broadway's Hijinx Playhouse lately, where Selina Kyle, purporting to be one of Gotham's most mysterious costumed nightcrawlers, The Catwoman, is currently starring in a one-woman show: Cat Tales. For nearly two hours, the buxom but athletic brunette, draped in a skin-tight purple catsuit that

leaves precious little to the imagination, enthralled the audience with anecdotes about a nightlife we all know exists in this city but which few of us have seen firsthand.

Ms. Kyle is certainly a striking figure. She purrs, hisses, meows and probably scratches with the best of them. She does a mean backflip. And this reviewer certainly wouldn't want to find himself in a dark alley on the receiving end of the claws she brandishes or the whip she wields with expert precision. The tales she tells about Gotham after dark and the figures that populate it are both amusing and insightful. But is she really Catwoman? That's the question on everyone's lips at intermission.

"If she isn't, she's taking a hell of a risk," says one camp. "The real Catwoman isn't likely to approve of someone else profiting from her name and image."

"If she is, she's taking a hell of a risk," comes the reply, "publicly confessing to any number of felonies six nights a week, two matinees."

It's the uncertainty that sells tickets, so of course there's nothing in the show to settle the question once and for all. To be sure, Ms. Kyle's monologue includes some knowledgeable details about breaking into an unnamed penthouse, but it wouldn't take much research into security systems to construct such a narrative once the facts of a crime were known. If authorities did charge Ms. Kyle and she claimed to be merely an actress playing a role, they'd be hard-pressed to prove otherwise.

Of course, the next most-asked question about this show is "What about Batman?" (*continued on E-5*)

Alfred was able to read this much over Bruce's shoulder. With the superhuman restraint heaven grants to English butlers, he resisted the urge to tear the paper from Bruce's fingers and turn to page E-5. Bruce looked up at him, seemingly waiting for a comment.

"Quite an unexpected development, sir."

"Quite," Bruce muttered sourly.

"Would you know, er, if this lady is who she claims?"

"How on Earth would I know that, Alfred? We fight, we wear masks; we don't exchange business cards."

"Indeed, sir."

"I'm sorry I snapped at you, Old Friend, it's just... my mind's juggling a thousand possibilities right now."

"Of course, sir."

"Call whatshername—Gretta."

"Brandi, sir."

"Brandi. Cancel our date tonight. And get me a ticket for this thing."

"Sir, if you're going to be attending the theatre, why not bring the young lady along?"

Why indeed, thought Bruce.

"No, break the date," he answered, then offered an explanation although none was asked for. "I don't know what to expect from this thing, and I don't want anybody close by gauging my reaction." He wasn't sure if he was telling the truth or not, and it made him uncomfortable. "No, wait—call Dick, see if he'd like to go. Get two tickets if he does."

Alfred was perhaps the only person on the planet who could truly challenge the man behind the Bat at these moments, and part of that particular privilege was knowing when not to question. Much as Bruce's logic seemed bizarre and arbitrary, he made the required calls without comment.

Bruce Wayne sat in the audience at the Hijinx Playhouse, displaying the icy poker face that Batman assumed at JLA meetings. The Hijinx was a trendy off-Broadway blackbox, a holdover from the 60s when Gothamites went to experimental theatre the way they go to restaurants today. It was not the sort of establishment that had private boxes.

Bruce couldn't help but feel a little exposed, sitting in the middle of a row of people as the woman onstage told story after story about the very private world of Gotham City "After Dark and 40 stories up."

He knew the woman the program called Selina Kyle was the real Catwoman: The voice was right... the hair, long and dark, that escaped through the bottom of the cowl... the costume was perfect... the body was perfect. It was her. The detective in him insisted he did not know this for certain. She could be an opportunistic civilian who had encountered Catwoman in some way and had an eye for detail and mimicry. But surely anyone other than the real Catwoman would have opted for the look of that absurd imposter in the tabloids. That was the image the public knew. But this...

This was the Catwoman he knew:

Modern architecture sucks, by the way. 87 stories of plate glass—boring. Now the older buildings, Stanford White—beautiful. Neoclassic lines, plenty of curves and molding—and footholds.

She gave her "aren't I a naughty girl" grin. The audience laughed appreciatively. Bruce didn't. That was his grin. He didn't like her sharing it with 98 strangers.

So I've got the trinkets. Brunhilda is still snoring away. Cujo, the killer schnauzer, is still locked in the bathroom. I close the safe, restore the power, slide the window back exactly the way it was—8 minutes flat. Personal best for a private residence where I didn't have the floorplan going in. I drop down to the alley—and there... he... is... The Batman. Caped Crusader. Dark Knight. Guardian of Gotham. Crime Fighter extraordinaire. I am Vengeance, I am Justice, I am in desperate need of a personality transplant... Batman.

In full regalia—looking like Sir Lancelot dipped in tar but not yet feathered.

And he speaks: "I don't think those jewels belong to you."

...

I salute you, World's Greatest Detective.

The audience loved it.

Bruce couldn't help flashing on every single time he'd urged her to forego crime and find work in the legitimate world. Somehow this wasn't what he had in mind.

He sat stunned as this woman who never failed to flirt with and proposition him at every encounter, who seemed to feed on the sexual tension between them—this woman who gave every indication that the attraction and even admiration he felt for her was mutual—publicly roasted him for the amusement of strangers. She critiqued his manner, his voice, his appearance, his vocabulary, and his taste in cars. She called him humorless, paranoid, obsessive, smug, melodramatic, and pompous.

She told, in viciously witty detail, a tale of an early meeting when she had offered herself to him and he turned her down. The audience booed.

She told another that was a composite of several meetings when they almost moved beyond banter, but somehow never did.

She told an *utterly untrue* account of a time he supposedly used her feelings for him to manipulate and humiliate her.

The boos became hisses.

Bruce felt his cheeks grow warm.

Was this really what she thought of him?

Her taunts and his parries were part of the game, weren't they? Okay, the game had gone on for a good few rounds, and maybe if you looked at the pattern a certain way, a different and an unfortunate connotation might be... he looked up. Catwoman had stepped off the stage and was walking through the audience on the armrests. She stood now with one leg on his armrest, bent over and spoke directly to him:

I mean, don't you think I have a nice body?

He nodded. More laughter.

If I came up to you and said "Hey, wild night of passion, no names and no strings, and I'll even bring the whip if you want." You'd say, what?

The laughter rose.

"Dear Penthouse..." she prompted.

An explosion of riotous laughter ripped through the auditorium.

So now I'm supposed to have had a thing with Nightwing. Can you believe it? I mean, he's a nice looking kid and all, but, c'mon, he is a kid. Some folks say he was the first Robin. Remember little Robin? I'm not saying I believe that, but it's possible, right?

A few people applauded to signal their agreement.

And I'm supposed to be getting it on with this guy. I mean, can you picture it?

She sidled up to a post at the side of the stage and fingered it with a claw as she often did the insignia on Batman's chest.

"Hey there, Handsome, let's get dangerous."

Then she answered for it as if it were the imaginary Nightwing:

"Why Mrs. Robinson, are you trying to seduce me?"

The audience roared.

But seriously, the gossip, it's a cost of doing business this way, and I try to take it all with a sense of humor as I think you've all seen tonight. But c'mon now...

And from the pouch in her costume where she normally stashed her safe-cracking tools, Catwoman produced a copy of the Gotham Post, with a headline in second coming type screaming **OFFICER DOWN!** She paused while the audience took it in.

I'm sure you all saw this.

In the past year, according to this fine publication, I'm supposed to have been arrested, convicted, imprisoned, tortured, drugged, brainwashed, escaped, kidnapped, escaped again, captured again, driven mad, shot Gordon, forced his retirement, cut my hair, got a new costume, had plastic surgery and a breast reduction.

And all while I'm cleaning my oven.

Well, here I am folks. You can see for yourselves about the hair, the costume, and a-hem, my other physical qualities.

You can also see that I am not currently incarcerated. I hope that you'll see from our talk tonight that the little chippie who's supposed to have been caught, drugged, brainwashed, et cetera, et cetera just isn't me.

As for my mental health, well, I'm not going to stand here in skin-tight purple leather and insist on my sanity, so—Hey, where's my boyfriend in the fourth row? You there—

She pointed at Bruce, then posed with hands in the air like a gymnast after dismount.

Sweetie, what do you think, am I just as sane as you are?

196 eyes turned to Bruce. What could he do but nod. She nodded back, laughing at him or herself or what exactly he wasn't sure.

I'm a perfectly healthy, well-adjusted catburglar who taunts my uptight priggish adversary with my considerable physical charms in ways that blur the line between sexual harassment and performance art! Right? Nothing crazy about that!

The audience cheered.

Okay then. Let me say this to Ms. Bronwyn Carlton and her followers at the Gotham Post: If I wanted to make a project of ruining Commissioner Gordon, I wouldn't need a gun.

She produced another newspaper with a conservative headline and columns of tight tiny type that read: **PRESIDENT LUTHOR ADDRESSES FOREIGN DIGNITARIES**

This paper, despite its 150-years of service in which it has amassed 84 Pulitzer Prizes, has roughly 1/8 the circulation of the Post: "In Japan, criminals expect to be caught. The closure and conviction rate in Tokyo, a city more than twice the size of Gotham, with no Batman, is 92.4 percent. Gotham City's 8 year high was 68 percent. 41 percent if you exclude apprehensions by costumed vigilantes. Conclusion: Commissioner James Gordon runs the most incompetent and corrupt police force in this country and may in fact be the most inept peace officer in the Western Hemisphere." ...Wow.

She clicked her tongue and considered the paper in her hand.

That's really bad. I'd retire too if the President said that about me.

So, now that we've established that even though I have big breasts, I'm still smart enough to come up with more creative and less lethal ways to strike at an enemy than shooting them, let's take a short intermission. And when y'all come back, I'll tell you about the night the Rogues Gallery went to a karaoke bar.

The lights came up, and a shaken Bruce Wayne retired to the lobby to hyperventilate into a paper bag until the second act began.

Dick Grayson was in the Batcave beneath Wayne Manor, shooting pool with Wally and Kyle... when his pool cue turned into a garden hose and the pool table morphed into an oversized viewing screen. Batman's face appeared on it, in an extreme close up, like Big Brother: "YOU'VE LET ME DOWN, SON," he intoned as a whirring tone sounded...

...:Twitterbringngng:...:

"Brainiac has analyzed pizza delivery patterns from Gotham City, Hudson University..."

...:Twitterbringngng:...:

"...Bludhaven, and the Titans Tower and deduced Dick Grayson is Nightwing...
:Twitterbringngng:... Tim, Barbara and I are all exposed because of your midnight cravings for pineapple and anchovies..."

...:Twitterbringngng:::Twitterbringngng:...:

Dick's eyes flew open and his arm shot out to smash the bedside alarm.

...:Twitterbringngng:::Twitterbringngng:...:

Oh hell, it was the phone. Who the hell would be calling at... He picked up the battered but not beaten alarm clock... 5:15. He picked up the receiver.

"HelloBruce, noyou didn'ttwakeme," he said without pausing for the other party to speak, "I only got in an hour ago and who needs more than forty-five minutes sleep a night."

...: Funny. Secure the line. ...:

What did I expect, thought Dick. "Oh gee, sorry kid, I never consider the possibility that other people have lives when they're not acting as my supporting cast." Aloud he said:

"Line's secure."

...: I'm coming into Bludhaven. Thought we could have lunch. ...:

"O-kay." (Did I really have to secure the line for this?) "Where and when?"

...: I'm at that diner across from your building. ...:

"NOW? That's not lunch. That won't even be breakfast for an hour. That won't be MY breakfast for another—yawn. Crud, I can't do math before I brush my teeth."

...: Dick, I came to talk. ...:

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

As he dressed, Dick calculated that even with the fastest of the civilian cars, Bruce would have had to cut Batman's patrol short by almost 2 hours to be in Bludhaven now. There was no way he'd do that for anything less than a cosmic crisis. "Dick, I came to talk," he had said. Bruce wanting to talk could indeed be the portent of a cosmic crisis. Maybe different timestreams were converging again. On the off chance that this was a chatty, sociable Bruce from an alternate dimension, Dick greeted him with a little harmless smalltalk:

"So how was the show last night?"

The scowl made it pretty clear that this was not a chatty and sociable Bruce. Dick backpedaled.

"I, uh, thought Alfred said something about you going to—never mind. What did you want to see me about?"

"Am I a self-absorbed, self-righteous, inflexible prig?"

Dick suddenly felt like he was playing a LucasArts Adventure Game. He imagined four possible responses to Bruce's question appearing under his chin:

- That's how I addressed your Fathers' Day card.
- Is that prig with an "R" Yes.
- Why are you having new stationery made up?
- YES YES YES! IN THE NAME OF ALL THINGS HOLY AND TRUE, YOU ARE THE KING AND LORD OF THE LAND OF SELF-RIGHTEOUS PRIGS!

And no matter which response the player chose, the character would say: "Why no, not at all. Why do you ask?"

Dick signaled to LuAnn, his favorite waitress, and ordered a bagel and coffee. Then he looked back at Bruce as if this, the most forceful personality in the JLA, might have forgotten his question. It didn't work. The scowl had deepened from the *Is-this-the-best-you-can-do* (Bruce reading his 9th grade history report) to *We-can-do-this-the-easy-way-or-the-hard-way* (Batman staring down street thugs).

"Yeah, I guess that description isn't wholly inaccurate, as applied to you, you know, by someone who felt you... were that way. Maybe."

"Is cop out one word or two?"

"See, that's the kind of thing you do that doesn't give people warm and fuzzies. You put me totally on the spot asking this unimaginably impossible question. Bruce, what the hell's going on? You show up here at the crack of dawn and drag me out of bed, I still don't know why, and you put me on the spot with this I don't know what of a—"

Bruce lifted his palm, fingertips extended, for silence. It was a strange gesture, something an ordinary person might do if they got the gist of what you were saying but had to think through their response. That wasn't Bruce. He just cut you off when he got the gist. And he never had to search for a response.

"I really wish you'd come to the theatre last night," he said finally.

Dick started to laugh, then looked incredulously at Bruce.

"You mean this is really about *that play*? Alfred made it sound like a hoot, but I wasn't going to drive all the way into the city just to see... So, what was it anyway, was it really Catwoman?"

"It was."

Dick grinned uncontrollably.

"Of course it was. Who else could get under your skin so thoroughly that you cut a patrol short to drive up here *AND TALK*."

"I know you don't like her, but could we just put that aside for a minute and—"

"Bruce, I like her just fine, considering she's a thief and all. But this thing you have about her, it's just too good for me to leave alone. It's like the only thing I can really rib you about. You love the wrong person; it makes you so *HUMAN*. You don't think I'm going to give that up, do you?"

Bruce sighed. He didn't even bother to challenge the use of the L-word.

"The first act was bad enough. She told... anecdotes... about us."

Dick raised an eyebrow.

"No, not racy ones. Just accurate. Hearing it all from her point of view, it was... disconcerting."

"And the second act?"

"Worse. She speculated how various figures in Gotham might react to her show. She did Two-Face, Joker, Riddler, Scarecrow, Ivy, Batgirl, Huntress, and Robin. I never realized she was so good at mimicry." He paused. "It was, it was actually pretty funny."

Dick stared, not quite believing his eyes or ears as Bruce chuckled.

"She imagined how Mad Hatter might rewrite her stories about me in the style of Lewis Carroll: 'First the cat kissed the bat, said we'd have such a ball, but that isn't all, no that's not all at all. If the bat kissed the cat, lo Original sin! One'd wonder just which Catnip patch he'd been in!'"

"That's more Dr. Seuss than Lewis Carroll."

Bruce gave him a dirty look, and again Dick backpedaled:

"I like it. So then what? Did she maybe speculate how Batman might react?"

"No."

"She didn't predict you waking me up at five in the morning next day, did she?"

"She said I was probably too much of an insufferable, self-absorbed egomaniac to even see the show, but if I did show up one night in her dressing room, she'd report back to future audiences with my response."

Dick laughed delightedly.

"So now, if you/Batman do acknowledge the show in some way, she's got a new finale. And if you don't, then you prove that you were too much of a self-absorbed egomaniac to go see it."

Bruce glowered at Dick.

"I'm just quoting you quoting her."

An hour later, as Bruce was driving home, Dick snapped open his cell phone. "Wally, it's Dick. Listen, are you doing anything this weekend? Call Kyle and Clark and the others. I just found out there's a new show in Gotham you're *all* going to want to see."

Raoul's Kafe-Kart had been on the corner of 59th and Madison for as long as anyone could remember. It served espresso, cappuccino and café au lait. Only. No hazelnut mochachino, no whipped cream, no flavored syrups, no oversized Rice Krispies squares. Raoul was there before corporate chains brought gourmet coffee into vogue. He remained while dozens of coffee bars sprung up around him. He would continue long after they had all been replaced with water bars and soup bars and chic boutiques selling eclectic pottery.

Bruce Wayne stopped this morning on the way to a too-early meeting at the Foundation. Raoul didn't see "Bruce Wayne," of course. He saw: Saville Row suit, dark glasses. Double espresso. Raoul had no way of knowing that the hoarse baritone that told him to keep the change was the result of Batman trailing a gun-running operation until after four a.m. when Bruce had to get up for a 9:30 meeting the next day.

Next was a stunning woman: Hermes bag. A dramatic silk scarf with an image of a jewel encrusted panther—the hallmark of a famous Gotham jeweler. A sweatshirt advertising: CAT-TALES at the Hijinx Playhouse. Dark glasses, too. Double espresso. Keep the change. Killer smile.

Some mornings, Gotham was a great place to be...

I took my coffee into the park, balanced it on the bench, and laid out Daily Variety and the Times. This was the choice, the same one I had been facing every day for a week. I opened the Times to the Lifestyle section. There are 8 million people in this city, a little over 4,000 millionaires, dozens of museums, hundreds of galleries, a wholesale diamond district; there had to be something worth purloining that's worthy of my talents.

I glanced at Variety. The show had been running for two months; I'd made my point. I cleared my name. And that was the point of the exercise, after all. I needed to close it and get back to work.

I looked back at the Times: An Egyptian Cat-God exhibit at the museum—*Been there*. Feline jade statuettes at AsiAntiques Gallery—*Done that*.

I peeked at Variety.

I wasn't out to become a star. In the past three weeks, I'd been approached to move the show to Broadway, air it as an HBO special, perform at the White House...

Maya Jaguar God at the University—*promising, but weighs 900 pounds if it weighs an ounce*.

...have my next caper filmed by an Indie film director, write the forward for a 'Cat Who' mystery, Co-host the People's Choice Awards with David Boreanaz....

Canary Diamonds! *Pretty, but hard to fence....*

"Live from Gotham City, it's Saturday Night."

No.

One thing I've learned from this: Show Business is perhaps the one field of human endeavor even more insane than dressing up in wild outfits to commit and/or foil crimes. Back to promising cat targets...

A memorabilia auction: Andrew Lloyd Webber's original working score of the musical CATS. *With a capital C, and that rhymes with D, and that stands for Dull.*

The thing is: now that I'd reestablished my reputation as an unrepentant but not homicidal thief, Catwoman's next caper would have to live up to the celebrated image.

What IS a People's Choice Award, anyway?

... ChatOn Software was moving their corporate headquarters here. Well now, *chaton* is French for kitten but that didn't mean they'd have anything I'd want to take. Besides, if Batman didn't get the feline tie-in... Much as I hate to admit it, stealing can be a chore. The thrill of a perfect heist sweetened with a little bat action is still a better rush than performing in front of any audience, but, let's face it: the legwork sucks.

Okay. Tomorrow the weekend edition would be out. One more day, I vowed, and I WOULD get back on the job.

I turned to Heather Hermoine's gossip column to see who else might have shown up in my audience. It was silly. Whatever heroes or villains had disguised themselves and come to see the show, Heather had no way of knowing who they were.... God, I hated to admit it, but it *was* fun. Doing my bit night after night, never knowing who was out there. Getting the last word on Bats....

The JLA sent flowers to my dressing room last night. I know it was them—the card had six anonymous comments, each in different handwriting:

"we enjoyed the show, thank you very much"

"so glad to see you embrace the path of righteousness"

"most amusing"

"could you teach me how to weather that stare of his, cause it always makes me cave"

"intriguing"

"so funny I almost pee'd"

I wondered if I should mention this in my act. *'The path of righteousness'* and *'almost pee'd.'* Who'd believe me? This is what's protecting the planet, folks, have a nice day.

There was still no response from the belfry. I was pretty sure he'd seen the show twice now, once the first week and once four nights ago. I had that tingly shiver up my spine.

At least Nightwing and Robin admitted they were there. 'Wing showed up at the stage door early the second week with a cheeky "Cucucachoo, Mrs. Robinson!"

Unlike his mentor, the kid has a sense of humor when there aren't diamonds and a grand larceny charge on the line. Good for him, I thought.

"Remember little Robin," he quoted sarcastically from the first act when I mock the idea of he and I as a romantic item.

"Hey, you wore green shorts. You made bad puns. You once said 'Holy Kitty Litter.' It warrants comment."

"You once said 'Purr-fect,'" he reminded me.

I'll be damned, I thought, thinking how Batman would've imploded into a black hole if I ever teased him like that. This one gave it right back. He really was a great kid.

"I make it a rule never to get involved with a man if I WAS THERE THE FIRST TIME HIS VOICE CRACKED," I replied. Mentally adding: *Don't have an answer for that, do you ya, Junior.*

He laughed.

"Okay, okay. Look, I just wanted to let you know I'd seen it and it's a great show."

I smiled back.

"Thanks... So, has Daddy been here yet?"

His grin morphed into a truly Batlike stonewall.

"You won't get your new finale through me. If he sees it, and if he wants to respond, that'll be his choice. I will tell you that Robin has seen it, and he liked your Joker and Ivy impersonations at the end. But he thought Scarecrow and Two-Face were over the top, and he thinks you should add Harley 'cause he always thought that Marilyn Monroe squeak-laugh she does is funny."

I stared. It suddenly occurred to me that the next rooftop encounter with these people is going to be very, very weird.

I'd disconnected the venthood, lowered myself into the power distribution venue, and began redirecting current to deactivate the motion-detectors without signaling a power outage. It's time-consuming but brainless work, and I got to thinking about my history with this institution, the oldest and most prestigious museum in Gotham City. I've documented eight separate ways in over the years. Thanks to me, they got it down to four, which is plenty.

I should explain that. In order to get on the museum's A-List to receive invitations to the good openings and receptions, you can't just be a regular member. You have to make a donation of at least \$5,000. Every year I do, happily. This museum is not only Catwoman's chief supplier, it's also a place Selina enjoys going on a rainy afternoon to commune with the Impressionists.

So the \$5,000 donation I don't begrudge them. I've always specified my donations go to the acquisitions fund. More and better art on their walls and in their vault is in both Selina's and Catwoman's best interests. But two years ago, *Impression Sunrise* was stolen—and not by me. It pissed me off more than the time Batman called me “kitten.”

Claude Monet's *Impression Sunrise!* This is THE painting! It launched Impressionism and, in a way, all modern art. The guy who took it came in through the skylight over the sculpture court. I mean, really! How movie-of-the-week can you get? I was pissed. I decided if they didn't tighten up security, every schmuck with a rock-climbing harness could walk off with whatever they wanted. We couldn't have that.

So, in the interests of keeping the masterpieces in the museum's collection exactly where they were for whenever Selina decided to view them or Catwoman decided to take them, I specified that my next donation be used to engage a top security consultant: Foster and Forsythe. I wasn't worried that a review by Foster and Forsythe would cut off all my entries. They can't, really. The Gotham Museum of Art has a complete mock-up of a pyramid inside its walls, a full-size Roman temple, and a loading dock that has to be able to receive monstrously large and heavy antiquities. And all of it has to be kept within very specific temperature ranges. The heating and ventilation requirements alone ensure that I'll always have plenty of options for breaking in, moving around, and getting back out along unexpected pathways.

Within two months, Foster and Forsythe had identified four of my pet ways into the East Wing, and closed a lot of smaller, less-significant gaps in the security setup. That, as I said, still left me with four routes in—which is three more than any self-respecting catburglar needs. Tonight, like picking the parking space at the mall nearest the entrance to your favorite store, I went in through the climate control shell between that pyramid exhibit and the museum's actual roof.

As I lowered myself to the floor, the first sight that greeted me was a magnificent, full-size sculpture of a woman with the head of a lion. At her feet were four life-size statues of cats with jewel-encrusted necklaces. That, I knew, would be Bastet. Not to be confused with Sekhmet, the lion-headed woman in the outer alcove.

You see, the Egyptians understood cats better than any people in history. Bastet came first in their mythology. In the beginning, she was the mother of the savage-faced lion god called Miysis, “Lord of Slaughter.” She was a god of war, of sorcery, associated with the eye of Re, the power of the sun and moon, and the breath of the desert. Over time, the goddess's character became more and more friendly, her sorcery

associated with healing, her motherhood emphasized, she became a protector. And so the fierce and destructive aspects of her character became Sekhmet. Her dark side was recognized as an independent personage. Something about that has always appealed to me...

"That's breaking and entering. You want to stop there, or should I come back in ten minutes once you've added a few counts of burglary?"

The voice and the tingle were unmistakable... Him.

But the words weren't right. I'm the one who plays games. Bats is always direct. I turned to face him.

"Why the choice?" I asked bluntly, "I'm the one who plays games. You're always direct."

He did that quirky thing at the side of his mouth, and I realized I must've sounded just like him right then.

"Look, one of us has to be the straight man," I said, a bit defensive about that sudden lapse into battitude. "If you're not going to do it, there's a vacuum. It has to be filled. So I repeat: Why the unusual opening? Why has it been all of 45 seconds without your trademark threat to 'take me down?' ... And why are you doing that bizarre twitchy thing with the side of your mouth that I assume is a smile?"

A real smile followed. It was possibly the creepiest thing I've ever seen. The creepiest thing I'd ever heard was to follow:

"Because this isn't a crime and for once I'm not going to pretend it is. You want to talk 'whys': Why break into this painfully obvious exhibit the very first night your show is closed, huh? This isn't a burglary; it's a date. You wanted to talk to me, Kitten, well here I am. What do you want to say?"

I stared. It may be fair to say: I gaped.

The awful thing is he was right. For Catwoman, Egyptian cat gods are a hackneyed cliché. I needed another Bast statuette like I need a hole in the head ...I realized at that moment that I was even *thinking* in clichés, which was disturbing... And Batman was staring. I guessed the favor of an early reply was required. I'd been facing off against him for years. I'd never feared him like the others do, and I had never, *ever* felt this... *UNCOMFORTABLE*. I heard my voice saying the first thing that came into my head:

"Shouldn't we be fighting or something? I mean, it's midnight. It's a museum. You wear a cape. Isn't this all a little talky?"

"Talky? You've been standing on a stage every night for almost four months telling stories about us."

"You know why I had to do that," I hissed, "You of all people must understand the importance of—*respect*—for the masked persona."

"Yes, yes." He sounded annoyed, like I was deliberately missing the point. "As far as protecting your image goes, it was ingenious. It's just—did you have to drag 'us' into it that way?"

Oh. My. God.

I suddenly clued in that this was the dressing room visit I'd been dreading and hoping for.

"Well... Maybe I didn't *have to*—but I think the audience would've felt pretty shortchanged if I'd dodged so central an issue, don't you think. If it's any consolation,

after going over it 500 times, I don't understand it—us—what we do—whatever it is, any better now than I did before."

He scowled. I gave a flirtatious smile. At least that much was back to normal. Any second now, he'd grab my wrists and say how he's going to take me down.

"How are we ever going to get back to where we were?" he asked.

I'd been getting big laughs on the inanities of our relationship for 15 sold-out weeks, but I've got to say, at that second, I no longer found it funny. Something snapped.

"Why in hell would we want to? Christ, how many years... how many *years* has it been that you haven't noticed 'where we were' *SUCKED!* Do you think I *ENJOY* being taken to the brink and back time after time after time after time after time? Do you think I get off on that 'Thanks but no thanks' martyr routine of yours?"

He looked mystified.

"I honestly thought you enjoyed it. You certainly looked like you were having fun."

"Maybe I was, maybe it was exciting—the first five or six times—but it got old. Don't you think it's gotten old?"

The twitch-smile returned.

"Honestly? No. Maybe you've never noticed who else is on my dancecard. With week after week of twisted riddles, giant flytraps, fear toxins, SmileX gas, megalomaniacs, mutant assassins, not to mention the garden variety murderers, rapists, muggers, mobsters and drug cartels, I've always found our little scuffles to be a welcome and refreshing change."

"Most people that want a change would, you know, take a vacation. Long weekend in the mountains, maybe some skiing. Or snorkeling. Surfing's good. Some just lie under a palm tree eating those big shrimp, sipping frothy drinks with umbrellas."

"I don't."

I felt a quirky twitch starting on the left side of my own mouth.

"Workaholic, I take it?"

"That's what they tell me."

"So you'd actually be quite pleased if I grabbed, eh, that bronze calico with the ruby collar and took off for a sprint across the rooftops?"

"No. I wouldn't."

"But you'd get as closed to pleased as you CAN get."

Long silence. He was considering it. I could see the answer in his eyes: "Perhaps." But he couldn't say it out loud. That would be admitting too much. For some reason I decided to let him off the hook, changed the subject. I also shifted my weight in the direction of the altar with the calico.

"I had it all worked out you know..." <step> "...what I would say if I found you in my dressing room—so it would sound good later..." <shift> "...it started with 'is that a batarang on your belt or are you just happy to see me.'"

I gave him the naughty-grin. He loves the grin.

He took a step closer, closing the distance between us. He was as close to me as I was to the altar with the calico.

"This," he said, "is the part where I'm the killjoy, right? Wet blanket? Stuffed shirt? Pompous self-righteous prig?"

“Well, if you want things back to the ‘way they were,’ then yeah, that’d be the way to go.”

“Is that what I do in the scene you had scripted?”

“Well, if you really want to set up the perfect bit for my finale, in the show I’m no longer doing by the way, you put on your best Bud Abbott/Harvey Corman/straightman face... Yep that’s the one, you got that down... And you say ‘So Catwoman, doesn’t it bother you that you’re mostly thought of as a busty, leggy sex kitten?’”

“So Catwoman, doesn’t it bother you that you’re mostly thought of as a busty, leggy sex kitten?”

He did it. He actually did it. No hesitation, not a smirk. And not the slightest hint that the great Dark Knight was above this totally silly exchange.

“Hey,” I answered on cue, “We have a killer clown, birds and umbrellas, schizophrenic lawyer, Alice in Wonderland, Shape Shifter, Fearguy, Mutant Plants, *and Sex*...which would you pick?”

You keep setting them up, Handsome; I’ll keep bringing ‘em home.

The mouth twitch returned. I got him.

I edged towards the altar again, he countered. It wasn’t ‘where we were.’ This was a new place.

But we can’t change too much too fast.