



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

#2

# Cat $\equiv$ Sales

*Normal*



by Chris Dee



**CAT-TALES**

**NORMAL**



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By  
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BATMAN, CATWOMAN, GOTHAM CITY, ET AL  
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# NORMAL

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I had the dream again.

I wish my subconscious would clue in that “The Relationship” is just a part of my public image and that Batman and I are nothing more than two adversaries who enjoy suggestive banter instead of spitting venom like other enemies do.

And yet every night since the museum, I’ve had this dream, the details of which are not worth remembering. All I know is it involves Him, and when I get up the gal in the mirror’s cheeks have this rosy flush going.

I’ve tried to explain (as well as you can explain things to the face in the mirror while brushing your teeth) that *Yes*- we got some issues out in the open that night, and *Yes*- our meetings since then have been a tad more lighthearted (if not downright playful at times). But that is just a normal reaction to having at last broken out of the absurd rut we were in. Like actors who’ve been on the same TV series season after season, we’re excited to finally move on and do something new. It means nothing beyond that. <Rinse> Men who dress up as bats and fight crime do not get cuddly with women who dress as cats and commit crimes, no matter how much they hint otherwise. <Gargle> So you may as well just stop rerunning that dream—or at least let me remember some of the details, ‘cause <spit> you’re obviously getting a better night’s sleep than I am.

I caught a glimpse of her reaction as I stepped into the shower: “*Right,*” she was thinking, “*anyone that wakes up with this half-smile and rosy glow is not going to be taking advice from a tightass with pillowhair that lectures her own reflection through a foam of Colgate and Scope.*”

“*Bitch,*” I thought. Since there’s no mirror inside my shower, I explained to the luffa that Batman is what we call ‘in the box’ in his thinking. He sees the world in black and white, good guys and bad guys, and there is just no way he can let himself develop this relationship beyond meaningless flirtation. If you ask me, that certainty that nothing will happen is the only reason he can allow himself the flirtation. “The bat has baggage,” I concluded emphatically. The luffa sponge offered no comment.

I threw on some clothes and crossed the street to Raoul’s coffee cart. I used to think being a night person precluded being part of Gotham –A.M., but I’ve learned that I rather enjoy watching the city come to life at the start of a new day. At first the streets are empty except for a few third-shifters heading home, maybe a half-dozen windows with lights on and silhouetted movement. Then the service people start to appear, then the lone jogger, a newsstand rolls open, another pair of joggers, and then within about fifteen minutes there are a dozen mini-dramas in progress involving school children, rollerbladers, commuters, delivery trucks, and street vendors.

Raoul at the coffee cart had a girl with him today, maybe 13 or 14 years old, too young to be an employee. It's a one-man operation anyway. I could see she didn't want to be there; she all but growled as she handed me my coffee. I told her to keep the change. When she smiled at her tip I could see the resemblance—gotta be his daughter. He wants to pass on the business, I thought as I headed down the street, and she wants none of it. Judging by the dramatic red and black of her sweatshirt and shorts combination, I figured her dream right now was to be a fashion designer; she thought selling coffee on a streetcorner was a drag. When she finds out how much tuition costs, she'll appreciate what Dad makes with that high-volume low-overhead cart in an upscale neighborhood off the park.

A suit in a hurry brushed past me. I know the type: from one of the bedroom communities across the river, he gets off his train two or three stops early to grab a tall cappuccino at Raoul's. It's not that the coffee is THAT exceptional, but it's a ritual. He likes to be seen walking those last few blocks to the office. It's a pedestrian city and this makes him feel a part of it, even though he sleeps in the 'burbs.

People who think Gotham is a huge impersonal place have never lived here. Every neighborhood is a village. I stopped for a paper and a loaf of bread on my way back. Pete at the newsstand and Giovanni at the bakery both noticed my coffee cup from Raoul's and asked if I saw Melanie, which I learned was the girl's name, helping her father and isn't she a beauty, going to be a heartbreaker someday that one is.

I mentally patted myself on the back for correctly doping out the father-daughter scenario. The way I figure it, Batman may be a great detective when it comes to crime, but he'd have never noticed something like that. Ordinary people like Raoul and Melanie aren't pertinent to his crusade.

As I returned to my apartment, Nick the doorman called after me as I stepped onto the elevator: He ran over with an envelope that had fallen from my coat pocket. I opened it on the ride up and read:

*Good morning, Kitten*

*You always get to pick the time and place. That's patently unfair.*

*Tonight, 9PM. Roof of the opera house. I'll be there if you will, unless a real crime intervenes.*

It was signed with the silhouette of an impossibly arrogant flying mouse.

I read it again. And again. And once more. The doors opened and Nick looked in, concerned: I realized I'd missed my stop and the elevator had returned to the lobby. I smiled like an idiot and pushed the button again.

What did he mean "unless a 'real' crime intervenes?" What were my crimes, imaginary?

From what seemed like a hundred years ago, I heard the echo of my mother's voice: "Don't be a tease, Selina. You lead a man on for so long, he's going to get the idea that he can take liberties. I know you think you can handle anything, but believe me, you too can lose control of a situation."

Oh mom, if you only knew.

**8:55 PM.**

Two blocks from the Opera House.

I repeated to myself for the 600<sup>th</sup> time this hour that curiosity is a notoriously fatal flaw for my kind. The streets were still bustling with people. It was only barely dark enough to be darting over rooftops. But I had to know what he was up to.

As I approached the roof, I saw what looked very like Batman sitting on a thick blanket laid out near the famous rotunda. *SITTING* isn't something I've ever pictured him doing. It's not as bizarre as seeing him smile, but it's not quite right.

"You came," he said, not mincing words as usual. "I wasn't sure you would."

"If I didn't come, I wouldn't be able to tell you: Don't ever call me 'Kitten.' So what are we doing here at this indecently early hour?"

"We're eavesdropping on a dress rehearsal."

"Let me guess, *Die Fledermaus*."

"Not at all. A program of assorted arias by Giuseppe Verdi. Unlike some of you, I don't have this sad need to make everything I do revolve around my namesake."

"Oh really? Care to explain the car, the signal, the batarang and the target on your chest?"

The opening strains of a familiar melody from below saved him thinking up a response. It was *La Donna e mobile*, the Duke's famous aria from *Rigoletto*. "Woman is fickle, fickle as the wind, one in a hundred won't..." do something nasty the minute your back is turned. I don't remember the details that well, but that's the gist. I didn't intend to let that pass unremarked:

"Nice choice of music for a first date, Stud. You do realize the guy singing is pretty much the biggest prick in the entire opera and that he's just projecting his own inability to dig in and make a commitment."

He looked stunned—like thieves aren't supposed to know about grand opera?

"Hey," I said, "just cause I wear a catsuit doesn't mean I don't have a grasp of musical history."

"That's not what I was thinking."

"What then?"

"Never mind. *Traviata* is next."

The soaring love duet that followed was a little much, and I was grateful when the tenor somehow offended the soprano and a spectacular diva fit erupted. Soon tenor, soprano and conductor were yelling at each other, and judging by the crash, someone, probably the soprano, threw something at the woodwinds. I stole a peek at Batman and saw he was having the same thought I was: the chaos made a much more appropriate backdrop for a date of ours.

Suddenly, under the blur of impassioned *Italiano fortissimo*, we heard the twanging of heavy coils uncoiling and a startled yelp. Our eyes met for a splitsecond, and I might have said "Go" but there was no need. He'd already taken off.

I glanced down to the streetlevel and noticed a jeweler across the way. Wouldn't that be delicious, I thought. I had a good fifteen minutes until he disentangled whatever stagehand was caught in the rigging.

Plenty of time.

I climbed down the grating, dropped into the alley and examined a window at the rear door. Alarm tape is nothing when you have razor-sharp claws. I let myself in and immediately noticed that one item had not been taken out of the showcases for the

night: it was a porcelain art deco figurine of a woman walking a leopard on a leash. I approached closer and saw sitting next to it... a basket.

For the 601<sup>st</sup> time tonight I reminded myself: cat + curious = bad.

I opened the basket anyway: bottle of Bordeaux, half dozen peaches, loaf of bread and a round of Brie. And another note:

*Selina,*

*You've said I'm inflexible, black and white, and incapable of change or compromise. It seems to me that you're the one declaring absolutes about what I will and will not do.*

*Not to mention doing everything you can to sabotage this relationship before it starts.*

*If you're willing to talk about it, bring the picnic basket up to the roof.*

*Otherwise, enjoy the leopard.*

B

That son of a bitch. THAT SON OF A BITCH!

I reread the note. I had to force my brain to associate meaning with the words. I felt lightheaded and realized it was because I'd forgotten to breathe. I took a deep breath and the intake of air going in collided midway down my chest with a welling of rage wanting to come out. The collision seemed to stop time while I thought...

Normal people, people like Raoul from the coffee cart and Pete at the newsstand, they think people like me must have split personalities. That's the only way they can make sense of being one person during the day and becoming another at night just by changing clothes and putting on a mask.

Freud thought that everybody's mind breaks up into different parts. He called them the Id (primal instinctive stuff), Superego (Conscience, Ethics and such) and the Ego doing an all out balancing act in between. Psychologists don't think much of Freud these days, but standing there with time stopped and a note from Batman in my trembling hand, I was a convert. Because I was conscious of three distinct thoughts coming from three independent parts of my brain with equal intensity:

1. ID: urge to claw Batman into 210 lbs of ground chuck.
2. SUPEREGO: need to return to the roof and hear what he has to say.
3. EGO: concurred on returning to the roof but realized ID would see it as a loss of face. Needed to find a way past the rage and the pride to find a rationale we could all live with... found one in the notion that the note was something of a challenge. If I didn't hear him out, it proved his assertion that I was the one stuck thinking in the box, throwing up roadblocks because I was afraid of letting this thing develop.

Ego then replayed my comment on Rigoletto's Duke: *"He's just projecting his own inability to dig in and make a commitment."*

ID said *Nice going, Selina, you just had to show off, didn't you.*

I returned to the roof.

Batman didn't comment on my return or the basket. But he did have two glasses, a corkscrew and a cheese knife laid out on the blanket.

I had no idea what to say. In this line of work, the usual thing to do when the situation gets this spiky is to throw a punch or toss a smoke bomb and get out of Dodge. Neither course of action was really appropriate under these circumstances—which is probably why we'd both gone to such pains to avoid letting things ever get this far.

I suspected Batman is having similar thoughts, since it was taking him two full minutes to open the wine. I've seen this guy remove an armed warhead from a surface-

to-air missile using directions written in Farsi. He couldn't be that baffled by a nickel-plated corkpull from Sharper Image.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I grabbed the bottle, opened it, and without knowing what I was going to say, I started to speak.

"Look, I don't know how to ease into it either, so just jump straight to the middle."

He looked grateful, nodded, then gave a little grunt before he spoke:

"Okay," he said finally—and it was that other voice he sometimes used now. The one that would use more words than the gravelly Bat. "Here's how I see it. Loving someone is easy. It's not an act of will, it just happens. You don't decide. Acting on those feelings, that's something else. It takes work. And it's risky. If it doesn't work out, you get hurt. With me so far?"

I nodded, fascinated and astonished he'd put so much thought into this.

"Now the life we've chosen, all of this, it's not easy. And it's not safe. So if we haven't... *acted* on our feelings so far, I don't think anyone can say it's the result of laziness or cowardice on our part, we're neither of us afraid of hard work or taking risks."

"I don't know about that," I said lightly, "There's a difference between the risk of getting shot or running into a burning building, and risking getting your heart broken into tiny little pieces and handed to you."

"This isn't a time to argue, it's a time to listen and go along."

I smiled. I always thought his stubborn refusal to have his views challenged was part of the crimefighting hero thing: the law is the law, goodness prevails and all that jazz. I was beginning to see that it's just his way. He'd be just as adamant telling me the right way to squeeze the toothpaste as he was admonishing my criminal activities. He continued with his theory:

"The thing is, we're not like other people, and we shouldn't try to define our relationship in their terms. What we have might seem odd to them, but so are the costumes, the masks, and the animal-themed monikers. What's 'normal' for them doesn't work for us. Their kind of relationships don't either—I've tried. Making lame excuses to disappear from parties, trying to get physical without showing fresh scars I can't explain... Trying to look at myself in the mirror after one of those all-night heart-to-hearts where she bared her soul and I didn't say one single thing that wasn't a lie..." He picked up his glass and took a sip. It reminded him of something: "Once I took a girl to *Maison de Pierre*, world-famous for their wine cellar. I was patrolling later so I didn't drink. She noticed, didn't say anything, just filed it away. When she got around to breaking up with me, she included in the laundry list of my faults my *dishonesty* in never telling her I was a recovering alcoholic."

I laughed. I couldn't help it.

"But you were dishonest with her," I pointed out. "You were hiding a secret, just not the one she thought."

"Yeah. That was the last intelligent woman I dated. It's been bimbos since then. It's safer. But...not very enjoyable."

"I don't see how it could be, if your prerequisite for dating someone is that she be too dim to notice you're playing her for a fool."

“That’s my point. Normal relationships don’t work for people like us. What we have does. They’ll never understand it. We’ll never be able to make sense out of it using their standards. But it does work. Let’s just accept it for what it is. Whatever it is.”

I was at a total loss. I could see I was supposed to say something, but nothing was there. I thought of the dream I couldn’t remember. I thought of the rosy glow in the mirror and the chill his voice sends down my spine. I thought of how cute it was that he’s as pigheaded in casual conversation as he is threatening to take me down for felony burglary. He was right: it’s not a relationship any sane person would call normal—but it does work. I still didn’t know what to say, so I leaned over, gave his cheek a gentle kiss, and his chest a light scratch.

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Selina had driven to her private preserve, The Catitat, in upstate Gotham and sat on a makeshift log bench, stroking her pet ocelot, Nirvana.

There's the kind of thinking you can do in the shower or at the gym—deciding to take a vacation or buy a new car... there's the kind of thinking you can do in your living room over a cup of tea—like balancing the checkbook, or learning conversational Japanese... and then there's the kind of thinking that requires a cat.

Today's thought absolutely required a warm mass of fur curled in her lap, a mass of fur that understood how things were.

Of all the cats, domestic and feral, she'd hooked up with over the years, 'Vana was Selina's favorite. She didn't know if any ocelots purred, but 'Vana did not. She growled. Selina would never forget the first time she heard that soft, low *Grr-Rrr-Rrr-Rrr*, like a small engine trying to turn over. She looked in the direction of the sound to see two amber eyes -and nothing else- peering at her from the black of a small cave.

Never one to fear cats, Selina had remained still, and a creature with the most exquisite markings she'd ever seen emerged slowly from the cave, sniffed her foot and her hand, then hopped into her lap and rubbed her head into Selina's arm to mark this new acquaintance with her scent.

And all the time this obviously friendly feline intoned: *Grr-Rrr-Rrr-Rrr*.

The quandary that demanded a trip to Catitat to commune with the wisest feline of her acquaintance was set off by a blurb in the morning paper, announcing a special collection of secular icons to be auctioned in Gotham City the following week: icons that pre-dated Christianity in eastern Europe, including a very rare series of cats made by an obscure cult called CatWomen.

Clearly, there never had been nor ever would be a prize so tailor-made for the Catwoman's acquisitive claws.

And yet, rather than salivating as she read this news item, Selina felt uncomfortable - and somehow annoyed. It forced her to acknowledge a reality she'd been avoiding for weeks: since she and Batman reached this new understanding, she hadn't been stealing. Oh Catwoman still went out at night, still prowled the neighborhoods she considered her territory, but she hadn't actually broken into anything or absconded with a single object that didn't belong to her.

Worse still, she couldn't justly blame Batman for this disturbing development. He hadn't said anything, hadn't done anything. On the contrary, he said "Let's accept our relationship for what it is."

*Grr-Rrr-Rrr-Rrr...*

She stroked the ocelot's silky fur.

Selina very much wanted to push the whole issue from her mind, but she forced herself to consciously and deliberately think through what had kept her from entering ...she picked a target at random... the Excelsior Towers two nights before: it was the eve of the Regatta Gala in the Grand Ballroom. Those attending would have taken their jewels from their safe deposit boxes and had them stored in those hopeless courtesy safes. Easy money, quick and quiet. So why didn't she take it?

It certainly wasn't that she was afraid of a confrontation with Batman. She'd handled him before; she was confident she could handle him again.

But then...

What exactly would a faceoff be like now that they'd become friendlier with each other when they weren't fighting?

No, she wasn't afraid of a *confrontation*, but she was, perhaps, just that much afraid of the unknown thing that might happen in place of the confrontation.

Selina jerked her arm reflexively. Nirvana had found a small scar on her forearm that, to a wild cat's sensibility, must have seemed like matted fur. She was patiently trying to groom it by licking the small area repeatedly with her rough tongue. It may have tickled at first, but Selina had been too deep in thought to notice. Now it was becoming sore. She slowly rotated her arm so Nirvana would lick a different spot... Nirvana had mothered many cubs more stubborn than Selina; she knew that trick. She took the arm gently between her teeth, turned it back where it had been, and continued licking the offending scar.

*Then again, thought Selina, maybe I'm over-thinking this. Maybe it's just... it took us so long to get past the adversarial stuff. What if the first confrontation brought us right back to square one...*

DAMNIT!

DAMN DAMN DAMN DAMNIT! DAMN

There comes a point where the stress and emotions tied up in a thought become a physical force. As she swore, Selina's body stood of its own accord -causing Nirvana to jump from her lap and run a few feet into the clearing- while Selina turned and kicked the makeshift bench (which was a lot harder than her foot). She landed on the ground (which was a lot harder than her ass) and examined her throbbing ankle. She looked up through tears of frustration and pain to see Nirvana, staring at her predicament with confused pity.

Selina was rationalizing and she knew it. She hadn't driven all the way up here to think up plausible excuses. She had vowed to be honest with herself....

It was fine to say "accept the relationship for what it is" —accept each other for what we are. But the truth is, if you care about someone you want them to be happy. And you want to please them. You don't want them to be miserable—and you especially don't want to be the cause of that misery.

If Batman found her breaking into some condo, however they might go through the motions of crimefighter and catburgler, he would be disappointed in her.

That's what she was avoiding.

Not the confrontation—the look of disappointment, maybe even hurt, that his mask would half-conceal but that she would know was there.

For the first time in their long, strange relationship, Selina dared to think about it from Batman's point of view. It wasn't easy for him either. He wanted... Oh who knew what Batman wanted... to stop crime, she supposed... but he wanted her too. The difference was that she had some control—his conflict depended on what she did. She was going to be conflicted no matter what, but if she decided not to steal, then he at least didn't have a problem...

Oh boy....

She had always tried to make Batman the source of the conflict: SHE wanted to be a free independent thief and HE wanted to tame her. How simple. How right. How PC. She was a woman refusing to compromise her job for a man.

She saw now it wasn't simple at all: Yes, she wanted to be free and independent but she also wanted to need and be needed. Yes, she wanted to steal if she felt like it, but she wanted to make someone happy too, she wanted to be the kind of person he would respect and be proud of.

It wasn't simple.

It wasn't about cats and their independence, or jewels & icons, or law & order or even Justice. It had more to do with... with... ? ... ? ... ? ...

Well it had to do with something—either something too complicated, or too basic to be put into words.

Nirvana seemed satisfied with this conclusion and trotted into the brush.

"Hey!" Selina called after her, "Wait a minute, I haven't figured anything out yet!—I don't know what to do next!"

But Nirvana was busy chasing a hare. The two-footed cats always made simple things so complicated.



“Stalactites stick *tight* to the ceiling; stalagmites *might* if they could.”

Bruce chuckled to himself. It’s odd the way those little tricks you learn at age ten stay with you for life.

Of course everything that happened to Bruce at age ten had stayed with him for life.

He’d retreated into one of the deepest caverns in the Batcave, where he came when he wanted to meditate after a workout.

Today’s workout hadn’t been productive. His concentration kept slipping.

Damn her.

It was bad enough at the beginning, when they’d meet as enemies in some alley and she’d distract him with a provocative move in order to stall or escape. It was bad enough when she was on a crime spree, that he thought about her (obsessed about her, Dick would say) more between confrontations than he did other criminals when they were active.

But now—now she was throwing him off his game WITHOUT DOING ANYTHING AT ALL! She hadn’t been active; he hadn’t even seen her in over a week, and yet she’d just brought his workout to a screeching halt.

Damn her.

He was aware that his anger was misplaced. He had only himself to blame for the recent shift in their relationship. He could have ignored the episode of her one-woman show, when she placed the ironies of their peculiar situation before the people of Gotham as a kind of performance art. If he hadn’t alluded to it, she never would have brought it up. It could have been—would have been—business as usual that night at the museum.

But how could he ignore it? She stood on a stage and said to anyone who bought a ticket that he was so out of touch with his own feelings that he wouldn’t do what any man in the auditorium would do if a woman like that offered herself to him. How could he let that pass?

Or maybe, maybe what she’d done was make him recognize there was a real person on the other side of all those propositions, a person who felt rejection when he said no. A person he was hurting. Selina wasn’t stupid. She knew he was attracted to her. God knows he’d never hidden it well. So in a sense, he had repeatedly led her on. He had encouraged the propositions and the semi-serious come-ons, only to reject them time and time again.

So yes, when this unintended but despicable behavior was brought to his attention, he’d lightened up a bit. He’d allowed himself... to smile at her. to flirt a little.

...And even to play a harmless joke or two.

He smiled at the recollection. It had played out so much better than he’d imagined. He’d figured that simple curiosity would bring her to the general area of the proposed rendezvous at the opera house, but that she’d probably back out at the last minute. When she did, she’d want to strike out with a bit of felonious bravado, and she’d break into the jewelry store. It was the obvious target in that neighborhood. She’d find the basket and his note and then...?... What would she do?

Well she’d surprised him straight off by coming to the meeting without breaking into the store first—and absolutely staggered him with her offhand observation that the Verdi’s Duke in *Rigoletto* projects his own inability to commit to a relationship onto

the women in his life. How can anyone, he wondered, criminal or crimefighter, be so insightful and at the same instant so very blind?

She had come to the rooftop without entering the jewelry store, and so never read the note he planted there. So he nearly said to her face that he'd accept that comment coming from a woman who was unquestionably the world's leading authority on projecting one's fear of commitment onto the other party... when the accident with the rigging inside the theatre called him away.

Then she'd shown her colors hadn't she—the minute his back was turned, *la gatta e mobile*.

What he wouldn't have given to see her face as she found that basket and read that note.

His smile faded.

Of course, when he'd said "accept our relationship for what it is," he hadn't mean to say it was okay for her to steal. But as he thought about it later, that's certainly what he'd implied. How could he have done that?

It was almost as though deep down he wanted her to remain a criminal.

That was ridiculous, of course. If she's a thief he would never be able to see her without feeling guilt... What was he, some kind of masochist? Did he want pain? Even when he's supposedly relaxing and enjoying himself ...What the hell did he have to be beating himself up for all the time?...

A dollop of moisture dripped off the stalactite and the drip echoed through the cavern.

She wasn't cooperating anyway. She hadn't been stealing.

It hadn't gone unnoticed.

Damn her.

I landed on the terrace, pure instinct getting me the last few yards—*home*—stumbled inside—heart still racing. I half-closed the glass doors, vision nearly blurring from the adrenaline—blood pulsing behind my eyes with the force of small rockets, limbs burning from the need to draw more oxygen than was currently available—collapsed into the nearest chair.

>>>>YEAOWRL!<<<< A blur of fur squirmed out from under me. *Sorry Whiskers, I'll make it up to you—cream in the morning.*

Goddess almighty... still breathing hard ... If I became Catwoman for the thrills, I could quit now. That was about as intense as it gets in one lifetime...

What happened was this: I decided I had been thinking too much, way too much. After the Catitit I saw that the only way I could continue to look myself in the mirror each day was to just get out there and DO IT. Damn the consequences, to hell with weighing all the whys and whatifs. DO IT! The thought was like a drug. All my frustrated rantings: DAMN DAMN DAMN turned to LIVE LIVE LIVE! And LIFE was a beautiful, beautiful thing.

I drove back to the city, changed into Catwoman, and waited impatiently for dark to fall. I went straight to the auction house, zipped into the vault, and found my way to the celebrated Cat Icons. There were five that were truly exceptional, and that was just about all I could handle without loading myself down. I had the third neatly stowed in my bag when this sick feeling came over me... I turned, and there he was, watching.

"Well that was predictable," he said finally.

I found I couldn't meet his eyes. I said the kind of thing you say when Batman finds you in the vault of an auction house filling a sack with icons:

"I don't look at it as stealing as much as observing practical socialism."

I never would have seen the slap coming.

The gloved arm just materialized at my cheek.

But he stopped himself.

Our eyes met then, and what I saw there I won't forget 'til my dying day. This wasn't Batman. This was ...how can I put this... a real person. A man whose wants and needs always came last, whose feelings Batman ignored and rode roughshod over more relentlessly than he did mine or Nightwing's or anyone else's. A man so used to being in pain he'd forgotten there was any other way to be.

The arm that only moments ago might've backhanded me into the wall now caressed my cheek. I heard my voice speaking:

"It would seem the 'accept the relationship for what it is' scenario isn't entirely workable."

"No," came the whispered reply.

Let me be clear about this—I did not intend to ram my knee into his gut when I started returning that kiss. He leaned in, and I may have let out a breath or something that he took as a go-ahead, because all of a sudden our lips were touching and there was this hand on my waist and another stroking my hair, and it was very pleasant for a few moments. But then, just as suddenly, it was way too real. I mean, just when I should've been thinking: *Wow, Finally, this is Batman, this is the fantasy*, I was acutely aware that this wasn't "Batman" at all. This was the guy inside Batman, and a very real and vulnerable man who could obviously be hurt very badly, and what the hell

was he doing getting mixed up with somebody like Catwoman of all people—and *that's* when I kicked him in the stomach.

He chased me, of course, not one to be put off for more than a second by a li'l knee in the stomach, not our Dark Knight. During the chase, I won't say I panicked but some kind of primal instinct took over. It was necessary that I not hear whatever he was calling behind me—that I be too focused on running to hear—that I be too far away to hear. I've never run so far and so fast in my life. I was paying for it now though, now that I'd caught my breath, my calves and thighs were on fire.

Whiskers, the cat I had evicted from the chair, looked up at me accusingly, and a horrible thought crept into my head: He was right. I am the one with more rigidly absolute, black and white ideas about right and wrong—not law, not crime—*Right...* and *Wrong...* There are things you don't do. There are Rules. Tonight, I broke the rules, big time. If I'd seduced Batman and then took advantage of the moment to hit him and escape, well god knows Batman can take care of himself. But tonight I was wholly aware that it wasn't Batman I was dealing with... more of a civilian... more than a civilian, an innocent... an innocent and vulnerable puppy of a person that I let kiss me and stroke me and then rammed my knee into his gut.

Shit.

In my mind's eye, I stand toe to toe with Catwoman back in that vault:

"It would seem the 'accept the relationship for what it is' scenario isn't entirely workable."

*Y'know what Catwoman, you cold-hearted bitch, It would seem the 'Don't think—Just do it' scenario isn't entirely workable either!*

I'm aware this conversation was a good deal more psychotic than talking to my reflection in the bathroom mirror. How did I ever come to a place where I was kicking Batman in the stomach to protect the guy inside from getting hurt by Catwoman?

The thing is: I know who that guy was. I don't mean I know a name or a face but... now that I'd made the distinction between them, I realized that he hadn't been *Batman* with me for some time. I couldn't say for sure when he stopped... Wait, yes I can. It was when he stopped calling me Catwoman. When was the last time he called me anything but Selina? Selina or that brazenly diminutive endearment...

"Kitten."

Almost against my will, I swiveled the chair around to face the terrace.

"I'd say it's been pretty obvious I knew where you lived since I slipped that note into your coat pocket."

An hour ago, I had stopped thinking of him as Batman. Apparently, he stopped thinking of me as Catwoman some time before that. Subconsciously, I knew that. That's what had spooked me in the vault. I guess I'd always thought, deep down, that it wasn't really me he wanted; it was just the forbidden bad girl.

It appeared we were moving beyond that.

This was *terra incognita*, uncharted territory.

I could tell because there wasn't one blessed cat analogy that came to mind to put the moment into any kind of context.

I slid the door open farther and considered this familiar stranger—I'd been so caught up in my own thoughts I had to play back the last thing he said to form any kind of rational reply: right, the note in my pocket, obvious he knew where I lived...

“Yeah,” I said, fully aware it’s not at all the sort of thing Catwoman would say to Batman. “I guess I would have thought of that if I’d been thinking clearly. Would you, um, like to come in and ah, have some coffee?”



If Alfred stayed up worrying every time Batman didn't return until dawn, he would collapse from sleep deprivation on a regular basis. Fortunately, he was a naturally light sleeper and his subconscious had learned to register the pattern of sounds that signaled Bruce's return:

- squeak, fourth step from the top of the main staircase
- one step on the hardwood floor of the landing
- soft brush of a heavy wooden door against the edge of the too-thick hallway rug
- faint gargle of water through pipe

Once he'd heard these sounds, Alfred's subconscious stopped listening for the Batcave intercom that would mean Bruce was home but in need of medical attention.

Alfred was unaware he did this, so he certainly wasn't aware that he hadn't heard the sequence of sounds the previous night. He just knew when he awoke that something wasn't right. Rather than dressing and preparing a breakfast tray, he grabbed a bathrobe and went straight to Bruce's room -only to discover that the bed hadn't been slept in.

He raced downstairs faster than was prudent for a man his age, collected the newspaper from the stoop, and saw with relief a picture of President Luthor misspelling the word "Potato" while visiting a junior high school in Utah. In Gotham City, any episode involving the Joker, Two-Face, Poison Ivy or other villains likely to do Batman harm would have dispatched Luthor's faux pas to Page 3.

Alfred was about to check the cave when a hunch told him to go to the kitchen instead. There he found Bruce, still in costume but with the cowl pulled back, hunched over a cup of day-old coffee. Alfred's relief that his employer was not dead was immediately displaced with a pang: Bruce looked younger and more lost than he'd seen him in many years. Alfred realized the reason with a start: Bruce's position at the kitchen table and the way he'd looked up when Alfred entered the room had flashed him back to when Bruce was a boy, waiting for the butler to fix him breakfast before going to school.

"Morning, Alfred."

The words too, and the inflection, took Alfred back the earlier time. In those days Bruce was always the first in the household to wake up, so eager to start the day, so hopeful and energetic.

Alfred deftly removed the coffee mug and replaced it with a glass of orange juice. He glanced at the cup: dregs with little bits of coffee grounds floating on the top. He thought about asking why Bruce would be drinking this revolting muck, but there was little point. It was most certainly the same reason he hadn't changed out of his Batman costume in the cave, and Alfred knew he wouldn't get an answer if he asked about that either.

"I'm sorry if I scared you, Old Friend, I didn't think there was any point in going to bed. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep."

Then again, perhaps a few questions would be productive. Evidently Bruce wanted to talk, or possibly to listen. That's why he was in the kitchen. It's where he would go as a boy if he was lonely or confused and needed a friend.

"I was not unduly concerned, sir," Alfred lied.

Bruce looked pointedly at the bathrobe Alfred still wore, an obvious accusation that the butler had been worried or he would have dressed before coming downstairs. Alfred just as pointedly kicked the corner of Batman's cape out of his way as he laid out plate, fork and napkin for his employer's breakfast.

Bruce knew when he was beaten. He might be a match for psychopaths, megalomaniacs, and interplanetary demigods, but he would never get the better of the man who raised him. Like a schoolboy who tried to waive the house rules "just this once" and failed, Bruce retired to the cave to change. When he returned to the kitchen, Alfred too had changed into his work clothes and had somehow finished preparing breakfast as well. How that was possible Bruce couldn't imagine, but he didn't know enough about cooking to know if the feat was really out of the ordinary.

"So, young sir," Alfred announced, setting a plate of French toast on the table, "suppose you tell me to what I owe the pleasure of having company this early in the day."

"She was there last night."

Alfred didn't need to ask who. There was only one 'She' in the manor or the cave these days. If you meant Harley Quinn or Wonder Woman or Lois Lane you said so. *She* was Selina.

"A not unexpected development, sir. You said yourself she could hardly pass up feline icons made by catwomen."

"It was bad. She was so flippant and I was so *angry* with her, with not being able to make her understand—I nearly hit her."

"Surely you've traded blows before, sir."

"I've done my job, Alfred. I've never... *lost my temper*. Not with her. But then, well, things happened... We got past it somehow. We talked." He smiled at the oddity of it, as if he was describing levitation. "We talked all night, in fact."

"Then progress is being made, I take it?"

"She invited me in; that was a first... 'for coffee'.... I thought it was a come on, but y'know, when I entered her apartment she was almost... *shy*." There was wonder in his voice. "And she made coffee and we talked like normal people. And neither of us screwed it up, can you believe that. It was—" for the first time in years Bruce Wayne laughed, "—it was great."

"Then progress is indeed being made, sir. I'm delighted to hear you and Ms. Kyle are finally pursuing a few of the more conventional courtship activities."

Alfred cleared the empty plates in front of him and began washing up with a quiet smile. He knew better than to ruin so promising a development by making too much of it, but he felt like laughing at the absurdity. The source of all Bruce's befuddled confusion was that he'd had a good time last night, and he was happy.

Long before becoming butler to the Wayne family, Alfred Pennyworth was a great fan of the most famous literary manservant: Jeeves. Jeeves organized (some might say manipulated) his employer's lovelife and personal relationships with the same ease and grace with which he managed his wardrobe. And Jeeves didn't have 1/20<sup>th</sup> the affection for Bertie Wooster that Alfred had for Bruce Wayne.

Bruce was happy. That wasn't a development to be brushed aside lightly. Alfred had never met Catwoman, but he was aware of Batman's preoccupation with her. In the

beginning he had mixed feelings about it: after the years of preparation, Bruce had been pouring himself into his mission with an intensity Alfred found alarming. This less-than-professional interest in the catburglar was at least a sign that there was still a human being in there who had not been wholly engulfed in “the crusade.” Nevertheless, Alfred’s principle concern had always been for Bruce’s safety, and there was no denying that being physically and emotionally drawn to an enemy was supremely dangerous.

It was Dick who put Alfred’s fears to rest. Like any young man, Dick was unsure of himself when he first began taking an interest in the opposite sex. He wanted advice, if only to ignore it, from an older, more-experienced man. Bruce was hopelessly ill-equipped for the job. Not only had he flummoxed all his own relationships with women, The World’s Greatest Detective hadn’t even noticed (or didn’t realize the significance of) Dick suddenly sporting a new wardrobe, combing his hair with Pythagorean precision, and asking to take out the Jaguar instead of the Porsche (bench vs. bucket seats). Alfred did see the significance, and he quietly instituted a new ritual: every Thursday while Dick was doing his homework, Alfred brought the boy a sandwich or a cold drink. He laid it on the desk next to him and then simply neglected to leave. Dick was a naturally amiable and outgoing kid. He lacked Bruce’s ability to coldly ignore another person hovering three feet away. Very soon they’d be talking about whatever was on Dick’s mind, and like most boys his age, what was on his mind was girls. About a month into the ritual, their talks expanded to include the women in that other half of Dick’s life: A healthy teenage male could hardly fail to notice the attributes of gorgeous athletic females in tight revealing costumes, regardless of their criminal or crimefighting affiliations. It was during one of these talks that Dick confided, with much amusement, that Catwoman was every bit as taken with Batman as he was with her.

Alfred was both relieved and piqued at the revelation. Batman was evidently not in danger of being killed by this feline fatale, well and good. But from the sounds of it, the lady was every bit as romantically inept as Master Bruce. What is the world coming to, he wondered, when grown men and women can’t manage so basic a human activity as coupling.

Alfred had watched the dramas and denials in the years that followed, but whatever his private feelings, he never seriously concerned himself in a matter that was, ultimately, none of his business.

That was about to change.

In recent months, the tempo of the whatever-it-was between Batman and Catwoman had quickened—with the unprecedented result of Bruce appearing in the kitchen before dawn, smiling, laughing, and describing something, anything, that happened in an evening spent as Batman as “great.”

Enter Jeeves.

Silencing a momentary qualm that interfering in Batman’s private life was something not even Superman would attempt, Alfred phoned Dick Grayson and told the boy, flat out, what he would be giving his mentor as a Fathers’ Day gift.

Bruce had rested, made a few phone calls on Wayne Enterprises business, and retired to the cave to analyze shipping records he'd downloaded for a smuggling case. He was scrolling through screens of data, not reading but looking for patterns and deviations, when he heard a soft cough. He spoke without removing his eyes, or his attention, from the monitor.

"I'm not hungry, Alfred; just leave it on the table."

"No sir, I've not brought you dinner. I wish to discuss the arrangements for the weekend."

"What? What arrangements?"

"This weekend, sir. Master Dick informed you he and Master Timothy would be patrolling the city in your stead so you could have some time to yourself—or perhaps not entirely to yourself, if I may be so bold to suggest it."

Bruce blinked and turned from the monitor in total confusion. Time to himself... Dick and Tim... patrolling... what the hell was Alfred blithering about?

Alfred repeated his statement, slowly and distinctly:

"Master Dick informed you last week, sir, that his Fathers' Day gift to you would be Nightwing and Robin watching over the city so you could have some time to yourself. As you may recall, sir, he attempted to surprise you with this kind of effort once before, but because of the surprise element you were not able to really enjoy it. He therefore told you in advance this time, with the understanding that you will take advantage of the situation by giving Batman a few days off."

Dick hadn't said anything of the kind, Bruce was certain...

But Alfred wouldn't *lie*, would he?

And, of course, Bruce wasn't above feigning attention when he was engrossed in work. Possibly Dick had mentioned something.

"I must say, sir," Alfred continued without a pause or a blush, "Master Dick was surprised and quite pleased when you agreed, as am I. I would never venture to bring up such a matter myself, but your own reluctance to take any manner of holiday does mean that I too never get any type of respite. I am somewhat anxious to begin this unexpected treat, so if you would be so kind as to decide where you are going, I can pack your things before I leave myself."

Catwoman returned from her evening prow, pulled off her mask, left the terrace doors open, and walked to the kitchen. She took a chilled bottle from the refrigerator and returned to the living room.

"I just noticed something—"

She gasped.

Did he always have to sneak up like that!

She held up a finger that warned "Don't say a single word" and walked deliberately up to him until the finger touched his lips. She took his hand in hers, and walked him to the doorframe, formed the hand into a fist and methodically wrapped the gloved knuckles into the wood.

"This," she said, "is called KNOCKING."

More and more often now, he stopped in after what he called his "late patrol." They chatted (sometimes easily, sometimes awkwardly), and they flirted (always easily, they

had so much practice). But he hadn't tried to touch her since the episode in the vault. This was as physical as they'd been since that night, and both were suddenly, acutely, aware of that fact.

*Can she feel my pulse racing through the glove?*

*Hand. Let go of the hand. Oh Hell.*

*How do eyes get to be that green?*

*How long have we been standing here? Somebody has to talk.*

"You, ah, just noticed something?" Selina asked in desperation.

*Why oh why oh why did I think this was going to be easier if we got past the claws and the Batarangs.*

"Yeah, um, cat stuff, you don't have a lot of cat stuff around your apartment. I always figured you would."

*Cat stuff? I've been thrown out of the finest preparatory schools on the Eastern seaboard. I run a Fortune 500 company. I outthink Ra's al Ghul. Why can't I string a coherent sentence together when I look into those damn green eyes?*

"Well, this isn't a hideout; this is my home."

The incongruity of the thought had shattered the mood and Selina's tone changed entirely. She wasn't angry, like Catwoman clawing at his eyeballs angry; she was miffed, like, like girlfriend miffed. Batman wasn't used to needing rescuing, but this was one instance where he was quite clueless! And his inexperienced fumbling was a danger to himself and others. Fortunately Bruce Wayne came swinging to the rescue:

*Yo, Caped Crusader! You see that gimlet look in those green eyes you were just admiring? That look means you've said something WRONG and you need to figure out what and FIX IT—right now.*

"Oh I didn't mean stolen cat stuff..."

Inwardly Bruce shook his head in his hands.

Finally Selina spoke.

"I have two house cats, Whiskers and Nutmeg—also a small curio in the bedroom..."

*...which we won't be seeing anytime soon, thank you Dark Knight.*

"...with figurines, and a not so small preserve upstate where the wild cats live."

"Really a preserve, now that I'd like to see sometime."

Inner-Bruce's head shot up. Batman had said something right!

The gimlet look melted into a warm smile.

*Now! Ask her now, before you can mess it up again.*

"Anyway, I wanted to ask you something. It's going to sound odd, but... Remember the night at the museum when you said most people that want a change go on vacation?"

"The words ring a distant bell."

"I was thinking of taking one. Actually I think I've been tricked into taking one. And I wondered if, I mean, I said it was going to sound odd and all, but I wondered if maybe, just—for a weekend, a longish weekend, a long-weekend-ish... thing..."

He ran out of syntax. Fortunately Selina was too busy laughing to notice.

Most educated people know Xanadu as either the name of the mythical pleasure dome built by Kubla Kahn or else as the equally spectacular residence of Charles Foster Kane in *Citizen Kane*. Only a few hundred people in the world ever heard of the real Xanadu, a resort on a very private island offering a hot spring, beach, mud baths, grotto, nature trails, and five-star dining—but most of all absolute privacy for movie stars, royalty, heads of state, and others for whom privacy is a virtual impossibility. The guests are known and referred to only by letters (“Mr and Mrs M will be dining in the grotto at 8:30.”), and rarely glimpse any of the hotel staff or each other.

As one of the true elite that knew of Xanadu’s existence, Bruce Wayne had occasionally thought about telling others in the JLA. No mere rock star had the privacy problems or the need for discretion presented by a dual identity. But what was the point? He was the only one who could possibly afford it. And besides, it would only take one tactless hero (Clark!) to go marching in there looking for a suspect and the place was dead.

Bruce never dreamed he would have cause to go to Xanadu himself. His appearances with the flavor of the month debutantes, supermodels, and divorcees (or “the bimbos” as they were universally known in the inner circle) were meant for the paparazzi cameras. Privacy was the last thing he wanted when he escorted a Gretta, Bambi or Candace to the Tommy Hilfiger party at Lot 61.

But the unexpected change in his relationship with Selina occurring just as Dick’s Fathers’ Day stunt forced this vacation on him had started him thinking. And the more he thought about it, the more tantalizing the idea became.

Hence, on Friday afternoon, “Mr. B” and his guest checked into Bungalow #4. They arrived in a private, chartered plane, prepaid by a numbered offshore account. Mr. B wore an Arab dish-dash and a black band that appeared to be the most outrageously expensive designer sunglasses on the planet, concealing his face from the bridge of the nose to the top of the eyebrow. The woman’s hair was wrapped in an elaborate silk scarf and she too wore sunglasses day and night. By Xanadu’s standards, they were a most unremarkable couple.

The understanding that was slowly evolving since the breakthrough in the vault was almost entirely between Bruce and Selina. Batman and Catwoman had stayed out of it, until now.

“I absolutely guarantee you will enjoy this a hundred times more without the shoes and socks.”

They were walking on the beach. Selina immediately kicked off her sandals and walked where the surf would lick her ankles. Bruce walked on the dry sand. Apart from the headgear, he was wearing what he wore at corporate retreats: polo shirt, casual slacks, boat shoes and dress socks.

“C’mon, kick ‘em off and walk with me in the surf.” The intonation was precisely the same as when she once said “*You’re part of the night, just like me.*”

“My slacks will get wet.” The intonation was precisely the same as when he had replied “*You’re a thief.*”

He might have read the determined glint in her eyes if they weren’t hidden behind dark glasses. As it was, he could only register the slight tilt of her head before he was

thrown on his back, one shoe off and a pantcuff rolled up to his knee. He easily flipped her over, pinning her arms and legs beneath him, and coolly pointed out that she'd only got one shoe and no one ever, *EVER* gets the drop on him twice.

A negotiation commenced: to get the other shoe off she had to tell him the whereabouts of some Roman mosaics never recovered from a robbery at the history museum two years before. The socks cost her an opal tiara. He would have claimed an Etruscan vase for the second pantleg, but for the impossibility of saying "Etruscan" with another person's tongue in your mouth.

They were exploring a nature trail near the lighthouse.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" he asked suddenly.

"You can ask. I don't guarantee I'll answer."

"Why?"

"Cause I want to hear the question before I commit to answering."

"No, I mean 'Why Catwoman?'"

"Oh. I have no idea."

"Seriously, Why did you become Catwoman?"

"Seriously, I have no idea. There's no way to answer a question like that."

"Sure there is. Look, first time you put on the mask: why did you do it?"

"Why does anybody do anything: it seemed like a good idea at the time."

"You're impossible."

"I'm self-aware. There is no true answer to a question like that. Anybody who tells you otherwise is deluding themselves."

"If you ask me 'Why Batman,' I could tell you in one sentence."

"Then you're deluding yourself. And P.S., I'm not asking."

It took exactly nine seconds to make the decision. Bruce had come this far into the weekend without showing his face or revealing any specifics that could expose his identity. He would never consider doing so now just to win a point in a fairly lighthearted argument. But there was something deeper at work—a truth to be defended. Or maybe it was a part of himself he wanted to share, wanted her to understand:

"When I was ten my parents were shot to death in a smalltime mugging. Happened right in front of me."

Selina was stunned—not just by the revelation itself, but that he would make it. She had no desire to make light of a personal tragedy, but she could see from his manner that she was expected to genuflect to this as the supreme end to all argument. That's undoubtedly what everyone in his inner circle did. At the end of the day he was Batman, and Batman was the final answer to all questions by authority of this awful thing that had happened to him. And in a flash of insight she knew, as certainly as she'd ever known anything, that what he needed from her was to not be another acolyte at the sacred temple of his ... Loss.

"Let's go back to that fork and go the other way."

Bruce was confused. He'd made this huge personal revelation. She considered him for half a minute then changed the subject entirely, like it was nothing. Like telling her

about the murder of his parents before his eyes was nothing at all. And here they were ten minutes down a new path, more trees, lots of birds twittering, a creek of sorts, more or less the same stuff that was on the other side. There didn't look to be anything special here, but she seemed to know the way, was practically racing down the path, getting farther and farther ahead of him. Finally he actually lost sight of her—lost sight of her altogether—until she bobbed in front of him, upside down, legs suspended from a tree, and kissed him full on the lips.

"How did you come to be standing on that rockbed, Handsome?"

He smiled, seeing instantly where this is going. They were still talking about Batman and Catwoman.

"I followed you."

"I didn't know that bed was there; I've never been here before. You took us left to the lighthouse. This is the other path and I wanted to see where it leads."

"I get it."

"Not yet, you only think you get it. So you chose a path at a fork in the road. The rockbed isn't here because of the fork or the path. The creek made it long before the path existed. The hot spring in the grotto made the creek; continental drift made the hot spring. And people made the path by chance cutting from the grotto out to the lighthouse, SO..."

Bruce was now beaming. "No easy answer, I get it." She nonchalantly lowered herself from the tree, and he gave her an affectionate peck on the cheek. "Next question: How did you get to be so wise, anyway?"

"I'm not wise, I just don't think there are any simple answers where people are concerned. They're too complicated for that. You cannot sum up a human being's existence in a sentence like a listing in the TV Guide. What's that saying: If you accept one truth to the exclusion of all others, you make the truth a falsehood, and you become a fanatic. Something like that—The exception makes the rule, and the contradiction makes the truth."

"Like a crimefighter loving a thief."

Beat.

"I've been avoiding that word."

"I'm not. I love you, Selina."

Long beat.

... Then an impossibly understated smile.

"And I love you."

"Bruce."

"Excuse me?"

“My name is Bruce. We’re alone in the middle of nowhere; nobody can overhear. I’d like to hear you say it.”

“I love you, Bruce.”

And the creek beside the rockbed trickled from the hot spring into the sea.