



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

#12

# Cat $\equiv$ Sales

*We Gather Together*



by Chris Dee



**CAT-TALES**

**WE GATHER TOGETHER**



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## WE GATHER TOGETHER

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"Writer's block? How can Poison Ivy have...?"

"Well, it's not writer's block *exactly*, but that's what we call it. You think those themed crimewaves just happen?"

"Yes."

"Well, they don't. It takes some planning: targets, timetables. You can't just improvise that stuff. And Ivy's out of ideas at the moment."

Batman (in costume, minus the cowl, but still very much Batman) looked like someone told him that gravity was just a theory and sometimes things fall UP. While he tried to wrap his brain around this bizarre new notion about criminal behavior, Tim gave up the pretense that he was playing Tomb Raider and not eavesdropping.

"There's only like a thousand florists in this city," he said, "not to mention a dozen environmental groups, and all the stuff with green in the name."

Selina just blinked at him.

"You want me to suggest that? 'Cause I've got her e-mail."

"I wasn't saying I want her to hit those places, I just think it's weird she wouldn't think to."

"Well, boys," Selina yawned—catlike—like she meant it, "It's been real. But it'll be dawn soon and I should get home."

"Stay," Batman said automatically, typing as he spoke. "I'll only be 5 more minutes." Normally he went to sleep after returning this late from patrol and would log the night's activities in the morning. But they were entering a season when the demands of the Wayne Foundation encroached on his daytime hours, and it was possible that Bruce Wayne's affairs would prevent Batman getting any computer time 'til the following night. Eighteen hours was too long to postpone making log entries.

Selina was quite sure "5 more minutes" meant sometime between now and the afterlife. And she wasn't about to be told to 'Stay' like a cocker spaniel until her lord and master had a free moment. She knew perfectly well how to realign his priorities—

"Okay, then," she began, heading for the passage to the manor and transitioning smoothly from Selina's voice into Catwoman's with each step. "Five minutes... then I'll be in your room... opening your safe ...and I'll be naked."

Tim turned his attention to Bruce, still typing for a second more until... there was no visible movement of the head or body, but his eyes snapped up from the monitor. "Did she just say...?"

Tim didn't bother to answer as Bruce began saving files in a hurry. He returned his attention to Tomb Raider, reflecting "Damn, Dick wasn't kidding about shameless banter in front of the impressionable young sidekick."

...: Bruce, face it:... the phone squawked in Dick's voice, ...: Mary Tyler Moore, Murphy Brown, and YOU! You have an appalling track record when it comes to giving parties. It's a curse. You entertain—disaster follows. So why don't you just take it as a hint from the cosmos and stop giving these parties. ...

"We make our own destiny, Dick. There is no curse. It's Thanksgiving; it's a family holiday. We're finally acting like a family around here. You'll be here if I have to—"

The threat that followed was not one most people would classify as familial, but allowances must be made for families that regularly find themselves shot at, gassed, bound, gagged, locked in dungeons, suspended from a height, buried alive, and shackled to explosives.

Bruce hung up the phone and dialed Selina. There were no snide comments about his party-giving from that quarter, but now that the subject was raised, he couldn't resist asking:

"So how come Catwoman never hit a Wayne party?"

The answer was not comforting: ...: *Too predictable.* ...

"Excuse me? *Canary Diamonds, Lynx Furriers, Tiger's Eye Opals, jaguar mask, Lionshare Brokerage, Egyptian cat gods, Maya cat gods, Norse cat gods, Kitty Barnes's Penthouse, Katz Jewelers...* and that was just the '90s!"

...: *There are exactly six hundred and forty three cat-related targets in the greater Gotham area; predictability wasn't a concern.* ...

Bruce, who only knew of four hundred and sixty, made a mental note to update his database.

"Are you sure your father's okay with this?" Selina was asking Barbara as the inner circle sat in the drawing room waiting for the other guests to arrive. Public opinion was more or less split as to whether Selina Kyle, the star of the off-Broadway show *Cat-Tales*, was indeed Catwoman, the notorious catburglar. She had no idea which opinion the former police commissioner held. But it was definitely Selina, the star of *Cat-Tales*, that delivered that devastating summary of Jim Gordon's performance running "the most incompetent and corrupt police force in this country." She didn't think he'd be eager to meet socially the woman who had pronounced him "the most inept peace officer in the Western Hemisphere."

"It took some weedling," Barbara answered, "but he's coming."

The unspoken allusion to Selina's show, combined with the recent talk of theme-crimes, made Bruce more aware than ever of 'the Catwoman factor' in their lives now, and he would undoubtedly attribute his next statement (and all it spawned) to that chance series of conversations.

Dick, on the other hand, would say Nemesis took note of Bruce's airy dismissal of *The Curse* and took matters into her own hands:

"Speaking of Jim," Bruce graveled in Batman's deep baritone, then he eased into Bruce's more casual day-voice as he went on. "I did want to mention that he's, you know, rather more familiar with Batman and Catwoman than most outsiders we've seen since... Well, I just wouldn't want to risk... I don't know how recognizable the teasing and the bickering might be to him, so could you please, just for me, dial it down to five just for the day."



Selina, Dick, Barbara, Tim, Stephanie, and even Alfred were too stunned at the monumental inadvisability of the comment to say anything for nearly 30 seconds. It was Tim who finally found his tongue. He turned to Stephanie and said, "See, other guys can too be that stupid."

Unfortunately he said it just as Dick took a swallow of mineral water and the resulting coughing fit spattered Barbara's silk skirt with droplets of moisture.

Selina accompanied Barbara to the washroom to repair the damage and, by the time they returned, other guests had begun to arrive, so it was impossible to openly discuss bat-related topics.

Nemesis cracked her knuckles. She was just getting warmed up.

Alfred did not make errors in the kitchen. Not of any kind. There was no way the delay of the turkey by a full sixty minutes could be laid at his door. At Bruce's, certainly, and Selina's too. For it was her fault that Bruce no longer looked on cooking as a mystical alchemy understood only by the high priest Pennyworth.

In his awakening to the culinary arts, Bruce had examined a number of foods in their raw and cooked states, working out all that happened to them chemically, at the molecular level, as they were mixed, whipped, pureed, baked, boiled, or fried. He had not investigated turkey, however, and he was curious to see how it was possible to roast two different kinds of meat, the softer white meat and the fattier leg meat, to the same level of moist tenderness.

The method was, in fact, a closely guarded Pennyworth secret and not one Alfred was inclined to share to satisfy some scientific curiosity that had nothing to do with the pleasures of the table.

Bruce was not inclined to take no for an answer and had made use of Batman's stealthiest intelligence-gathering techniques to learn the secret. He discovered the bird soaking in a brine of vegetable broth, kosher salt, and allspice berries, and he easily worked out what was going on: Seeking to balance the salt content inside and outside the bird, there would be a constant flowing of moisture in and out of the meat, which would trap the moisture and the flavor in the turkey where no amount of overcooking would dry it. It was ingenious!

Unfortunately it was so ingenious that Bruce had to see it with his own eyes, and he snuck into the kitchen several times to obtain a cross section of the turkey meat in various stages of roasting for later analysis under a microscope. Each time he opened the door, a little heat escaped from the oven, and by the time Alfred discovered the violation, an additional hour was needed before the enormous bird would be ready.

The delay, during which Alfred nursed his grievance against both Bruce and Selina, gave Nemesis a grand opportunity to arrange the company into twos and threes, where a variety of unfortunate comments were overheard:

*Overheard by Selina:*

"Hey, Dick, Bruce doesn't do that 'what I'm thankful for' around the table, does he?"

"Never has before, Tim, but this year, who knows."

"Damn, I hate those."

"You could say you're thankful your girlfriend doesn't threaten to set you on fire."

*Overheard by Mrs. Drake:*

"Glad you could have us over, Bruce."

"Couldn't keep you and Tim apart on a family occasion like this, Jack."

"Not just that, if it was at home, my stepmom, well, we love her, but..."

"But her idea of Thanksgiving Dinner would be some soy turkeyloaf."

"And sprouts."

*Overheard by Barbara:*

"Hey, Tim, so what was that thing before with Steph?"

"Dick, shh. Keep your voice down. I'm in enough trouble, okay? What thing?"

"Other guys can too be that stupid."

"Oh, she showed up in a new outfit last night. 'Do I look fat in this?'"

"Ouch, I remember when Babs did that to me. Do they all do that? Why do they do that?"

"To HURT US."

"It was that awful blue thing with the yellow. I wanted to say, 'No, doesn't make you look fat, makes you look like you'll give me a lapdance.'"

*Overheard by Stephanie:*

"Tim."

"Hey, Bruce."

"So what was that thing before with Stephanie?"

"'Do I look fat in this?' ... She did, too."

*Overheard by Cassie:*

"Alfred, please, take pity on me, change the place cards. I've offended every woman here, and if I have to sit next to one at dinner, I'll never get out alive.... Except Cassie, I haven't said anything about her. Hell, what is there to say? She doesn't talk. Sit me next to her; that'll be safe. It'll be like sitting with a potted plant, but it'll be safe."

When they sat down at last, the lines of discord crisscrossing the long banquet table would have made a fine cat's cradle. The only exception was the one person one would expect to be nursing a grudge: Jim Gordon. The retired commissioner was on his best behavior. There was more, he was certain, behind his daughter's insistence that he accept Wayne's invitation than simply not leaving him alone on Thanksgiving. He looked at Dick and Barbara seated side by side, thinking they were hiding whatever spat they'd had, the same way they thought they hid that they were in love. This was a *family* gathering.

While Dick clinked his glass, Gordon considered that he should really talk to Bruce. They were going to be family; the man should know how much his friend knew.

Dick said he had an announcement to make—and Gordon wondered if the delicate discussion with Bruce should be held now at the official engagement, or on the wedding day itself.

Dick said he hoped this news would be of special interest to Commissioner Gordon—today, he decided. He would be too choked up at the wedding.

Jim Gordon sat back in his chair, assuming the posture of the Proud Papa... And then...

Dick said that he'd received a special commendation for busting an extortion ring that had been operating in Bludhaven.

Nemesis chuckled as the entire company was again stunned into silence.

Everyone had made the same assumption as Jim Gordon: it was a holiday meal, Dick had a special announcement, of interest to Barbara's father. Dick was the only one who didn't get it, not even when his would-be father-in-law intoned in a voice heavy with sarcasm: "Yes, indeed. I can't tell you how very *pleased and proud* I am to hear Dick's *wonderful news* about the -cough- extortion ring."

He would later find an unexpected ally in Selina, who complimented "pleased and proud" as suitably parental verbage for the slam, but added that she would've hit the word *ring* with a little more irony.

From that moment on, they were friends.

Having escorted Jim Gordon and the Drakes to the door, Bruce returned to an empty drawing room. Alfred, Selina, Dick, Barbara, Tim, Stephanie and Cassie had all adjourned to the kitchen, where Dick was halfway through one of his standup routines on "The Curse."

"Seems we've proved definitively, we don't need a Joker, Harley, Ivy, Hatter, Two-Face or Croc for these little affairs. We can destroy them quite nicely on our own."

"We?" Barbara questioned, munching a cold drum stick. "You're the diplomatic genius who got my dad worked up with all that 'special announcement' crap."

Dick considered flinging a bit of cold potato at her, but Alfred anticipated him and moved the bowl out of his reach. Cassie immediately reached for it and served herself a large helping. Alfred gave her a pleased smile. Of all the bickering dinner guests, she was the one who had not let the emotional cross-currents affect her appetite. Indeed, she had eaten more than Dick and Tim combined.

Before entering the kitchen, Bruce took a final glance at the east window, hoping vainly for a reprieve from the Bat-Signal. Nothing but a clear and empty sky met his gaze.

He sighed, then swung open the kitchen door with just enough Bat-bravado to upset Tim's acrobatic reach for the whipped cream and cause the bowl to spill over, dropping an enormous white glop squarely on Alfred's foot.

It was enough. The tension bubble popped, and first Dick, then Selina, then Tim, then Steph, then Barbara, began to smile. By the time Alfred smiled, Dick was laughing. By the time Cassie laughed, Selina was holding her sides. By the time Bruce gave in to a half-twitch, Barbara had tears streaming down her face.