



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

#14

# *Cat* ≡ *Fables* *Times Gone By*



by Chris Dee



**CAT-TALES**  
**TIMES GONE BY**



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# TIMES GONE BY

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*"But seas between us braid hae roar'd  
Sin auld lang syne."*

--Robert Burns, Auld Lang Syne

Tim and Stephanie were not prone to the angst-ridden tribulations of the older couples. It was New Year's Eve and their conversation was devoted to the most famous song no one knows the words too: Auld Lang Syne.

Robin had won the toss and he and Spoiler were stationed in a prime position overlooking Gotham Plaza, while the others patrolled less interesting parts of the city.

At 12:01, Robin indulged in the common dating maneuver of quoting famous movies. In particular, Billy Crystal, *When Harry Met Sally*, 1989: "What does this song mean? My whole life, I don't know what this song means..."

It would have brought at least a chuckle from any girl in Gotham—except Stephanie Brown, whose father was the Cluemaster and whose mother was a teacher of English Literature and of Scottish descent. Her parents' disparate interests in obscure trivia, Celtic pride, and a fierce admiration of the poet Burns meant that Steph was able to provide from memory the original 18th Century transcription and a modern translation of all four verses of the classic song.

"It means Times Gone By."

"Isn't that Casablanca?" Robin asked.

"That's AS Time GOES By."

"Oh. Well anyway..."

"We sing: 'Take a cup of kindness yet for times gone by.'"

"Most people I know sing ♪-dum-dum-de-dum-dum-DUM-dedum, FOR AU-ULD LAND SYNE-♪."

"Then the next verse, the friends take hands and drink 'a right guid-willie waught.'"

"Mm. Very interesting. So anyway..."

"...which'd be a drink. My Mum'd say that's a mite more important in the highlands than a cup'o'kindness."

"Got it, 'a right guid-willie waught.' So ANYWAY—looks like the crowd's thinning out down there."

"♪-But seas between us braid hae roar'd, Sin auld lang syne... ♪ "

"We're singing now? Steph, I was just making a joke."

"Means ♪-Seas between us, broad, have roared, since Times Gone By-♪..."

The world of the Batman was complicated with a variety of wildly-clad, hyperactive characters with sinister intentions. Alfred's world was not and he planned to keep it that way.

He was happy—no man more so—that Dick and Barbara had at last taken the great step of becoming engaged. But that did not call for the introduction into their lives of a wildly-clad, hyperactive character with sinister intentions. That did not call for the introduction of Mr. Corry.

Mr. Corry was a wedding planner. A Wedding Planner. A dark foreboding shuddered through his system at the mere thought of the words. Dear Miss Gordon, she was an outsider in the world of old Gotham society. She didn't know yet, poor thing. Things like that were not done, not at this level.

Dick might be a Flying Grayson, the former Robin, and Nightwing the scourge of Bludhaven, but he was also the son of Bruce Wayne... of the East Egg Waynes... Thomas's boy, and Martha's, who was a Van Giesen and a cousin to the Bassets.

There were forms to be observed. It was that simple.

Alfred expected resistance on this point from the younger generations that didn't think such things mattered. He expected it from Barbara; he expected it from Dick, and he expected it from Bruce—Bruce who thought nothing of disgracing his family name, appearing as a fop and a rake at the slightest provocation.

Well, Alfred got the expected resistance from Barbara. And from Dick, although that didn't count. For as the boy was soon to discover, the groom's opinion on any subject from the dress to the seating arrangements ranks right up there with that of the family dog.

But Alfred was pleased to find an unexpected ally in Bruce. Bruce wanted to make a fuss. He hadn't been much of a father to Dick, especially since the boy had grown up. No support for his transition from Robin to Nightwing, no show of pride for his leadership of the Titans. It was time to make amends, and this was how he would do it: a big announcement, a big party, a big splash—something to make the papers and set the social world on its ear. Dick was his son, and Bruce Wayne was going to say so in as grand and public a manner as possible. So there.

The more Alfred hovered around the murmured conversations about flowers, music and color schemes, the more encouraging glances he perceived from Bruce. When Alfred ventured to cough at a particularly objectionable suggestion, he perceived a nod from his employer. When he actually suggested to Barbara that he be allowed to make some calls of inquiry, he saw an out and out smile from Bruce. By New Year's Day, the name of Mr. Corry was heard no more at Wayne Manor, and Alfred was firmly in command of the Gordon-Grayson nuptials.

No one involved in this glittering but unremarkable story so far could realize that Talia Head, a.k.a. Talia Al Ghul, daughter of Ra's Al Ghul The Demon's Head, had long ago put feelers in place to notify her if someone at Wayne Manor ever made the inquiries Alfred was now making about diamond solitaires, tiered cakes, engraved invitations, photographers, flowers, musicians, caterers, and couturiers...

### **January 2nd, A-minus 19**

Dick sorted through an unusually thick stack of mail. He'd spent days at a time in Gotham before...

bill, bill, bill

...just not recently. There must have been this much mail waiting for him in the past...

flyer, bill, 500 free hours of AOL, Christmas card from "Aunt Kate" (do I have an Aunt Kate?)

...he just didn't remember it that way since he'd been confining himself to the family dinner/patrol, one-night-only visits.

The drive back to Bludhaven was quiet time, time alone in his head, the first chance he'd had to really think since popping the question. It didn't happen the way he'd planned it. It wasn't a story they could tell their friends; they'd have to fabricate something suitably romantic later. More lies. There was no aspect of their lives that wasn't tied up in lies and cover stories. Sometimes it bothered him. But at least it was done. He and Barbara were engaged to be married.

Dick wasn't aware that he'd had 'expectations' until they weren't met. It took so much to work himself up to that proposal. It was the first time letting go of the trapeze, the first time putting on the mask as Robin, first time having sex, nothing was supposed to be the same after that. But he was the same. Barbara was the same. It was kind of surprising. They had lots more to talk about now. Stupid as it sounded, he hadn't fully realized to get to married you have to go through the wedding. (And he sure didn't realize what the wedding entailed.) Yes, they had a lot to talk about now, but they were still Dick and Barbara, and the way they were together hadn't really changed.

1000 hours of AOL plus free digital camera!...

... and a slip of blue paper:

"Dick, Not alone this week are you? Come have a slice of plum pudding at your neighbor's. Clancy"

Oh dear.

And another one:

"Guess you had plans. Merry Christmas Dick. Clancy"

Then a coupon book, a W2, and another sheet of blue. This one smelled faintly of red wine:

"I get it you're in Gotham. Give 'em all my best best- well you can't do that because you'll be back when you read this. Clanc"

and finally:

"If you're back, come have a glass of champagne with your neighbor. Happy New Year. Clancy."

Oh hell.

It was a flirtation—a harmless flirtation. She was his landlady, she happened to live next door, she was about his age—but it didn't mean anything. It was just fun. Why do people have to assume any contact between an unattached male and female is some big romantic thing? Hell-o-hell-o-hell... People do get sentimental on the holidays though, don't they? And lonely. Oh man. He had to fix this...

**January 3rd, A-minus 18**

"Here it comes," Selina whispered, "the death rattle."

On the stage far below, the vengeful princess Amneris, third side of the most powerful love triangle in opera, pleaded (in Verdi's most intense writing for a mezzo-soprano) with the Egyptian priests to spare her lover Radames, whose fate she had already sealed in a fit of jealousy over his love for Aida.

"Selina's Operatic Rule #4: whoever make a noise like that will not be getting the guy in the end."

Bruce smiled. It was the last act, and the couple had relocated at intermission. He noted with amusement that, while Selina understood opera well and was clearly enjoying it very much, she did not approach it with the reverence of a typical opera fan. She would whisper only occasional comments in the theatre, but here on the roof she was free to let herself go.

Here on the roof... It wasn't so very long ago that he met her here as Batman.

It was a crazy risk to take, unlike him—inviting her like that.

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

*9PM. Roof of the opera house.*

*I'll be there if you will, unless a real crime intervenes.*

Inviting her to meet in costume but off the clock, so to speak. No crime for either of them to hide behind. How did he ever manage to do it? How did he ever pull himself out of the quagmire of guilt, denial and self-righteous posturing he'd worked himself into?

"I am vengeance, I am justice, I am...in desperate need of a personality transplant."

That was how. Her show—where she'd said it out loud: they wanted each other. She said it out loud, and the universe didn't collapse on itself. Then that strange epilogue at the museum. He said it. Well not exactly, but he'd said "This isn't a burglary, it's a date." He alluded openly to the fact that he was a man and she was a woman and there was something between them that had nothing to do with bats, cats, or crime. And again the universe didn't implode. He smiled at her that night—and the gaping void of nothingness didn't rise like a great anti-matter serpent and swallow the cosmos whole.

That was all it took: that little pin-prick. That led to the note, which led to this very roof, which led to all the rest.

"She has the audacity to act disappointed now," Selina was narrating again. The defeated Amneris mourned over the sealed tomb in which Radames was buried alive and where his true love, Aida, had hidden herself in order to die with him.

"Remind you of any jealous deranged hypocrites you know?" she added, but that wasn't why Bruce grimaced. He was remembering this duet from that night—"Nice choice of music for a first date, stud."

It sure was: Rigoletto, Traviata, Aida, La Forza del Destino, Un Ballo in Maschera. All the loves sung of that night ended badly. What a spectacularly bad omen for a first date. Well not exactly a date, and not exactly their first—but still.

### **January 6th, A-minus 15**

Dick's hands shook. Nightwing! Black Belt! Acrobat since age 4! Trapeze artist since age 6! And his hands shook trying to dial the freaking phone. He had to talk to Barbara—or maybe Bruce first. Get some advice from the more experienced thoughtless playboy asinine womanizer shithead—he had to fucking fix this.

"Your decorator called."

After leaving those four heart-breaking notes over the holidays, that was Clancy's sole comment when she saw him again. Not the slightest reference to plum pudding, Gotham, or New Year's Eve. "Your decorator called."

He didn't have a decorator.

"From Gotham. Getting mighty fancy on us, Mr. Dick. Getting a bigshot city decorator."



*This isn't opera, this is life.  
Why should love have to be tragic?*  
—Langford Wilson, BURN THIS

### **January 7th, A-minus 14**

The degree— to which Batman was genuinely troubled may be gauged by the fact that he cut the final turn from the public road onto the Wayne property so short that the left rear tire flattened a miniature dogwood, turfed a patch of azaleas, and ultimately failed to set off the electric eye. Having failed to disable the hologram that concealed the cave's main entrance, he drove through what appeared to be a wall of solid rock without batting an eye.

He removed the costume like a man in a trance, then stood in the costume vault for a full minute, staring at nothing. To conceal his preoccupation, if only from himself, he took a shower in the cave before changing into Bruce Wayne's sweater and slacks and ascending, reluctantly, to the manor. Selina would be there by now—and Dick—and Barbara. Saturday. Family dinner. Why did it have to be tonight? He needed her alone. And Dick would be so damn amused if he asked to talk to her privately. Dick's flippant amusement was one thing he didn't need right now.

There had been a cat crime at the historical museum, a cat's eye crown set with onyx and lapis lazuli. Catwoman hadn't done it; that was obvious. Even Bullock knew it. The crown was, in all probability, less than 300 years old, made to cash in on an 18th Century fad for ancient artifacts. The same museum held far more valuable pieces; some Roman mosaics depicting leopards in the coliseum were valued at \$450,000. The crown was, at best, worth \$15,000. If he knew that, Selina did. Her guilt or innocence wasn't the issue.

The issue was that he knew—KNEW—she was innocent before he'd heard the facts of the case. It WAS NOT POSSIBLE that she had done it, no more so than that Dick or Tim or Alfred could have done it. He trusted her, that was the issue, trusted her absolutely.

He'd thought love was the big word. It was a big, yes; hell, when it finally came along it was monumental. But this was something more. This was his jugular exposed, his neck on the chopping block—total naked vulnerability. He trusted her. Jesus Christ, how did this happen?

They had to slow down, that's all there was to it. The situation had gotten completely out of control.

Barbara had been busy. After selecting Dick's new couch she looked at carpeting, chairs, endtables, wallpaper, plants, pictures—the works. She wanted to surprise him, set it up while he was away. She called his landlady to find out about wheelchair access at his building. But Barbara was no decorator. She was Oracle, she was once Batgirl, and she was a policeman's daughter. She could read people. Something in Clancy's manner, her voice when she said Dick's name, it was a dead giveaway.

This was so much worse than Huntress. A one-time bit of passion between costumed identities was one thing. An ongoing flirtation, if not an intimate friendship, if not more, with Dick, that was another matter entirely.

And she hadn't known about this one.

Alfred repeated that he was not aware of any change in plans.

Bruce's continued absence from "Family Dinner" might be explained by the signal that had appeared just at dusk. But it was turned off over two hours ago and he still hadn't returned.

Dick was a no-show and so was Barbara.

To be honest, I wasn't that heartbroken about Dick & Barbara. I was getting a little uncomfortable with them lately, particularly the bride-to-be. Since the engagement, Barbara seems to want a 'girlfriend'—which would be fine, except... she's asking way too many questions like: if they have the wedding at the manor, what colors would be good in the great hall?

And then if maybe I don't want to voice an opinion about a color scheme for a freaking WEDDING in the great hall of WAYNE MANOR (for godssake Barbara!), then I get: "Oh come on, don't look at me like that, Selina. You have good taste—Or the garden! Wouldn't the garden be perfect in the springtime?"

Plus, okay, maybe I'm still smarting from having stepped into that trap in the delicate matter of the Bridal Registry.

Alfred said register at Bergdorf's: silver, crystal, china. Barbara thought Bergdorf's was stuffy. Bruce grunted something about listening to Alfred. Dick said who cares. And then—then—all four of them turned and looked at me.

Now, okay, a lot has changed in recent months, but still. Remember me, lady with the whip? Meow? We can never get past smoldering looks 'cause you're a thief and I'm Batman? REMEMBER THAT SHIT? I don't think I'm the one that should be stuck breaking deadlocks because the bat family can't reach a consensus.

I didn't say any of that, of course. I went and powdered my nose. But Barb followed me! A little estrogen solidarity, she asked for.

Okay then, I told her: Marveck's on 49th. Gorgeous stuff, tasteful, quality, but not stuffy.

And she cackled. No "Wonderful, thank you so much!" No "estrogen solidarity." She indulged in one of the most revolting cackles of triumph I have ever heard in my life—and I've heard Joker! This was a spectacle. It echoed through the halls of the manor. Dick heard it, Bruce heard it, and worst of all, Alfred heard it. (I don't sweat pissing off Nightwing or Batman, but Alfred? I may be brash, but kitty isn't crazy.)

So I tried to concoct a nice, respectable, Catwoman reason for knowing about Marveck's.

"Couples leave town right after the wedding," I told her, "leaving an unoccupied condo full of gifts. A Bridal Registry is like a thief's yellow pages."

Maybe not brilliant, but plausible, don't you think? I really think a 'girlfriend' should have backed me up here, but ol' Barb cackled even louder. Estrogen solidarity indeed.

No modern woman likes to admit to thinking about this stuff. It's not important after all. Marveck's happens to have nice china and crystal—and they happen to have a bridal registry. I don't know why I retained that little bit of information, but I did. Sue me.

"None of them called?" Selina asked with a touch of that hardness Alfred had once assumed was her 'Catwoman' voice.

"No Ma'am, er Miss." Alfred had never encountered 'Catwoman,' so it was a normal assumption at first. But the more he saw of her at the manor—at the far end of the dinner table, sitting with Bruce by the fire, sparring with Bruce by the fire—Alfred was beginning to hear something else, a similarity to the late Mrs. Wayne.

If Bruce was a forceful personality, it could be fairly stated that Martha Wayne was a force of nature. That's not to say she was shrewish, but she was strong and confident, as the daughters of those founding families tend to be. Like Bruce, she felt deeply and had strong views about the way things should be.

Also like Bruce, if she latched onto something, she committed totally: 10,000%. That 10,000% was a concept not recognized, nor even possible in any type of mathematics would not deter her one bit. Hospital needed a Neo-Natal wing and Mrs. Wayne was on the job: organized 3 balls in 7 months, made the rounds of all the industrialists before corporate donations were a common practice. She preyed mercilessly on the social climbers, dangling invitations to the Wayne Garden Party and the Debutante Cotillion. If only they could give enough to get onto that committee with her their place in Society was assured....

It was she, Alfred knew, who was responsible for the Wayne name on all those libraries, museums and university buildings. Thomas would have written a check quietly, but Martha! Martha wanted to use the ambitions of the nouveau riche the same way Bruce would one day use fear in criminals. There was the same kernel of ruthlessness behind it, any means to the end: There was only so much one family could do on their own, but if their donations could motivate others to give, that's what they needed to be doing. Hence, ultimately, the Wayne Foundation.

It was also Martha that instilled a great sense of responsibility in Bruce. "The more you are blessed with," she would say, "the more you need to give back." Bruce was to inherit a great fortune, a name that brought influence. She could see from the similarity to Thomas that he would be handsome, and even by age six it was clear that he was fiercely intelligent. He'd been given so much, she instilled this sense of noblesse oblige, a responsibility to give back, which—although she certainly never intended it—contributed more than a little to his tremendous sense of guilt.

Batman found a way to postpone Bruce's return to the manor: It was a cat-crime. It was a frame-up. And there was one particular person that would want to harm Selina—one who, still on the outs with her father, would not have access to subtler means of making trouble.

Bruce sat at his workstation and pulled up the file on Ra's Al Ghul, then entered a secondary code that accessed his private file on Talia.

Out of habit he avoided looking at the picture and concentrated his attention on the text. Scrolling past the introductory facts, dates, and places, his stomach tightened as he neared his observations and analysis in the fields below.

The first phrase that popped out at him was "genuinely torn between me and her father..." It struck him that that wasn't entirely accurate. She chose her father every time. She always said she felt bad about it, but that's not being 'torn,' that's disappointment that she couldn't have her cake and eat it too.

"Divided loyalties..." Again, it seemed a poor choice of words. Loyalty was a free and independent being's conscious choice, a choice to stand by a friend or a cause, come what may. It was a commitment of strength and character. Passively staying with a tyrant because you're conditioned to be a submissive little lotus blossom, that is neither free nor choice nor strength nor character.

Bruce glanced absent-mindedly at the photo, then kicked himself for the slip. Her image would suck him in now, silencing his doubts in spite of everything...

Except it didn't.

He saw a lovely and exotic face, a face he knew—that was all. It had no power over him. He saw a woman that would caress his cheek instead of scratching it and call him 'Beloved' instead of 'judgmental jackass'—and would leave him, hurt and defeated and alone.

"Are you that stupid or just self-destructive?" The voice was so soft, Bruce thought for a moment it was his own—until the hand reached around and snapped off the monitor.

Dick was livid.

He'd opted for "advice from the more experienced playboy womanizer" and he'd come to Bruce—but the Bruce that advised him on the proposal dinner, the Bruce who pulled it together and was finally making a life with Selina. Not this schmuck sitting alone in the Batcave mooning over Talia's photograph!

"She's the best thing that ever happened to you," he screamed. "How can you jeopardize that? How can you even think about ruining it for some meaningless flirtation with... that... psychotic, shallow, obsessive, treacherous daughter of a Fu Manchu clone!"

Dick had never hidden his contempt for Talia or for Bruce's weakness for her. Defensive, Bruce had always shutdown these outbursts with brutal finality.

On this occasion, however, there were no tender thoughts to be defensive about. He was clear-headed enough to see as Batman saw. He noted the words Dick spoke and the telling pauses... "the best thing that ever happened to you... how can you jeopardize that... for a meaningless flirtation with -pause- treacherous daughter of Fu Manchu" (Dick's usual tirade about Talia).

Instead of Batman's most ominous growl, it was a strangely tentative voice that finally spoke.

"Dick, has something happened between you and Barbara?"

The Sensei said those moments of understanding never last. He said it's easy to forget our times of knowing, to believe we made an error at the very moment we were truly wise. He said I would suffer this more than most, as I am prone to assume the worst of myself.

Of course, the Sensei never understood. He knew I was there to get something. He knew I could only go along with the philosophy to get what I needed. The training said the hate, the fear, the pain disrupted the natural flow of Ki. You must let go of these to connect with the Oneness of Being. I can put myself into that mindset to workout and to fight, but I can't live there. I cannot give myself over to the ebb and flow of the universe. I can't stop hating. The Sensei knew that much—he made it clear that I wasn't fooling him—but he didn't understand. He thought I was stubborn. He thought I had a choice. He didn't understand that the world isn't like that, that you can't think that way and live in this world.

When I left, he said he'd lived in this world longer thinking his way than I had thinking mine. But his world isn't Gotham.

The moment didn't last.

Poor Dick.

I could see he was in pain. He hates Talia, yes, but that outburst wasn't meant for me. I tried to be there for once, to be understanding. And what did I get? "Bruce Wayne and his women... Batman and his women." My reputation was the cause of all his problems, like he's had nothing to do with this harem that's collected around him. When I was his age I was preparing, studying. I was in Tibet listening to the Sensei tell me the moments of understanding don't last.

"Damn it, boy," I snapped at him when I could stomach no more, "You want to be your own man, stop blaming everyone but yourself for what your life is."

That's how long the moment of understanding lasted.

Well, no one ever called me "Mr. Sensitivity."

It's done now. There's no taking it back.

Robin and Spoiler were young enough to still celebrate when they'd captured a name criminal, even one as inconsequential as The Mime. Nightwing found them near their favorite drivethru. Irked at the happy-couple appearance he perceived (though in fact, they were just patting themselves on the back), he was less than polite to Spoiler. He said he needed to talk to Robin on "family business" and turning his back on them for Robin to follow or not.

"Well, that was rude," Robin announced when he caught up with Wing.

"No hassles tonight, okay bro?" The weariness in his tone said it better than the words.

"Okay, Dr. Drake consulting. What's up?"

"You know what today is?"

"7th"

"Yeah. JANUARY 7th—fourteen days and counting. All the excitement with the engagement I forgot: Hell Month, bro."

"Shit. I forgot too."

"I just yelled at him."

"You what? Wha'd you go pick a fight for!"

"I FORGOT, OKAY. And I didn't PICK a fight, I had it thrust upon me. I found him hunched over his computer sighing over Talia's picture for chrissake—and Selina waiting upstairs!"

"I don't care what he was doing, you've got no business yelling at him at a time like this!"

"Do you think I don't know that!"

"Yeah. Well. Better to apologize now, you think, or wait 'til after?"

"I don't know. Better to get it over with I s'pose. Hey, did you ever warn Selina?"

"About Hell Month? No, did you?"

"Oh no."

The Sensei said those moments of understanding never last. He never mentioned that they might flicker out (or in) in the middle of a sentence. That you could go into a room thoroughly expecting to say one thing and suddenly find your mouth has been hijacked and you're saying something else entirely.

The situation with Selina was—is—completely out of control. And I was—I am—I will put a stop to it. It's just that, when I walked into the dining room and saw her, I realized there was the whole cat-crime thing to explain first. She had to be told, and it was going to be hard enough going into that while making it clear she was not a suspect and this was not a conversation with Batman... but we need to slow down. No. That just wouldn't work.

So I put it off. Yes, I put off saying "let's slow down," but that doesn't explain how I wound up saying the other.

"Sorry I took so long," it began.

"No problem," she said airily, "I just sat here watching the silver tarnish. Anything exciting in town?"

"No. Not really. Well, not exactly—"

"This sounds good already."

*My first mistake. I hedge and she gets excited. Like if I'm uncomfortable, it automatically means she's going to have fun. Impossible woman.*

"It's not what you would consider a big exciting case, no," I explained.

"What a curious formula of words."

*The gimlet look. She knew I was being evasive and she did—damn her—she did as she's always done. Stuck her hand on my chest and her tongue in my mouth and pulled whatever she wants out of my brain while all the blood is flowing elsewhere.*

"Don't... do that," I stammered.

*Never worked before. Didn't work now.* The voice in my ear was all hot breath:

"Why not?"

"This is serious," I said, pulling her arms off me and trying to step back. That never worked before either... but it never produced the look she gave me now. No playful pout, no 'claws are out' glare, no naughty grin, it was more... Jesus, what was that? Cold. Searching. Gears turning. Selina?

Without meaning to, I blurted it out.

"Something's happened—historical museum—a cat-crime."

The whatever-it-was look deepened into whatever-it-was squared—hurt, scared, indignant, I still don't know.

"I see."

"Look, I know you didn't do it. It's a non-issue, I swear. Even the police know—they knew before they called me..." I was throwing out too many words without thinking—not like me—but I had to make that look go away. "Selina, listen to me, this isn't a thing. I know you didn't do it."

"I heard you the first time."

What does that mean?

"What does THAT mean?"

"It's not like you to repeat yourself is all."

Oh.

"Oh."

"So what did the police want?"

"Hmph, kind of funny actually. New commissioner has political ambitions—doesn't want to honk off Bruce Wayne or his new girlfriend, so..."

She smiled. A good sign.

"...so they asked Batman to question me?" she said, showing she understood.

"Yep. Well not question-question. Just, 'do you know of any enemies that would want to set you up this way?'"

She gave a disgusted grin: "Yeah, head usher at the Hijinx Playhouse."

It was my turn to smile. She prattled on about how the ushers hated the part in her show where she walked through the audience on the armrests. I slid an arm around her waist and felt the tension ease out of my shoulders. It was over; we were going to be all right...

NO! This was not all right. This was not the status quo. 'All right' was not my relaxing because Kitten wasn't upset with me. 'All right' was not feeling good that Pussycat understands I'm not accusing her of anything. 'All right' was not trusting Catwoman so blindly and absolutely that she could destroy my world just by—

"Bruce?"

...just by...

"Bruce, you're holding on a little tight there, you want to let go."

...I looked down into those deep pools of green. Yes, she could destroy me. But she wouldn't. She wouldn't betray me, then leave me hurt and alone. She wasn't like Talia...

"I'm not kidding, let go."

hurt and alone. Why would I want that? Why did I ever think even for a moment...  
*Are you stupid or just self-destructive*, Dick had asked...

A blinding pain shot from my elbow to my wrist, and the arm fell open.

"Sorry about that, but I warned you."

I stared stupidly.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"I'm sorry... Kitten... I just have... a lot on my mind right now."

“Yeah, I guess so.” The whatever-it-is look was back. “Give the demonspawn my best,” she said and started for the door.

The demonspawn...

“Talía?”

“You said her name during your little fit of catalepsy just then.”

The sound of her heels clicking towards the door was enough to snap me out of it. Selina wouldn’t leave me, I had said. That’s true... unless I drive her away.

I ran after her. I thought *‘out of control’ ‘jugular exposed’ ‘slow it down.’* I caught up with her—*‘neck on the chopping block’ ‘slow it down’*—I turned her to face me—*‘slow down’ ‘slow down’ ‘slow down’*—and I started to say it:

“After all we’ve been through, all that’s happened, not just the past year, but all of it... Selina, Selina how can you doubt that it’s you who... are the love of my life?”

*Life is what happens while you're trying to do something else.*

—John Lennon

**January 8<sup>th</sup>, A-minus 13**

There are women out there who find shoe shopping therapeutic. I am not one of them. The stress-reducing qualities of finding the perfect spectator pump with gunmetal heel just eludes me... Even on sale, even if you have the perfect handbag to go with them. I don't get the thrill; it's just plain nuts.

When I'm freaking out, I put on the catsuit. And before anybody says that's weird, I would ask them to step up and explain the shoe thing to my satisfaction. Then they can analyze Catwoman all they want.

I went back to the opera house tonight—and the museum—and the vault at the auction house. I guess I wanted to put the relationship into some kind of context or something. Who knows... 'Why' isn't a question I ask a lot in the catsuit.

I would have gone back to Bruce's safe, but it's a better than even chance that he would've found me and if he did, he'd think I wanted to play. I didn't. Not tonight. And not with him.

The love of my life?!?!?! Where did *THAT* come from? Where the fuck did that come from?

Right after the shoe thing, I'd like somebody to please explain how we got from 'the right to remain silent' to 'the love of my life' because that was *not* supposed to be possible.

I was breathing hard.

I'm not sure exactly what had me so... agitated?

Scared. The word is scared.

I've been playing with fire, not just for months but for years, and now it turned out this stuff I thought was flame retardant is, in fact, lighter fluid.

Nice bit of sophistry there, Selina. Now can you explain what you mean by it, or shall we go look for a nice patent leather slingback?

It was months ago we said 'I love you.' I took that plunge without even thinking... It was like a deep breath after climbing stairs. It was automatic. Easy. Painless. Since then I've been going along, letting myself be pulled along ...fun and sex... fun and sex... without thinking much about what it meant... fun and sex... Bat and Bruce... but...*THE LOVE OF MY LIFE?* Jesus, Bruce.

Wait a minute, stop right there—not Bruce, Batman! Let's try and remember this started with Batman.

*THE LOVE OF MY LIFE!* No pressure there, Stud.

That's like: 'the one,' your soulmate, your once in a lifetime chance to screw it up for good. *YOUR ONE AND ONLY SHOT!* Happiness, love, everafter, the music swells, the curtains close, and the credits roll, copyright Paramount 1956.

That's what doesn't happen.

That's what just isn't possible.

Batman and Catwoman? Maybe. Why not. We've done it. It's doable. But *THE LOVE OF MY LIFE?*

That doesn't happen to people like us.

We've got to slow down. Hell, we've got to back up.

A curious thing happened right then... Catwoman slapped me. Seems there's a line even I don't get to cross.

"FIRST," the cat in me hissed, "'people like us' are PEOPLE. What can happen to *them*, can happen to *us*. What you're describing may be rare—but it does happen occasionally. Every 10,000 couples or so somebody gets a shot at it. Sooner or later it was going to happen to someone in spandex—may as well be you. May as well be us."

*Yeah right, I thought, may as well be me that gets the rare chance to screw this up permanently.*

I'm not sure how she did it, but Catwoman uncoiled the whip. I shut up and listened.

"SECOND," she went on, "since when do we back down from a challenge? We don't fold when the stakes are high, do we? We raise the ante."

For the 65<sup>th</sup> time since January 1<sup>st</sup>, Moira Selmon muttered that they weren't paying her enough to put up with this shit. Then she reminded herself of her new year's resolution to stop swearing. Desperate for some act of defiance that wouldn't cost her her job, she opened up her screensaver and replaced LEXCORP: A BETTER VISION FOR A BETTER FUTURE with LEXCRAP: WHAT DOESN'T KILL ME MAKES ME STRONGER.

Lex Luthor, still the real CEO of LexCorp, had taken his private secretary and her staff to serve him in Washington. Moira was 'promoted' to serve as the stand-in's secretary. Moira had no problems with the word "secretary" as a job description, but she objected to it as a name. Yet Miss Head still addressed her this way occasionally—as did that caller. He of the unpronounceable name and the 10,000 rude messages.

*...: Secretary, please inform your mistress that she is to call me at once. ...*

*...: Secretary, inform Miss Al Ghul—What? No, I do not mean Miss Head, I mean Talia Al Ghul—that she is to contact me immediately. ...*

*...: As you still live, Secretary, I assume my messages are being delivered. Tell your mistress that I am most displeased that she continues to ignore me. She is to call at once. ...*

Finally Moira asserted herself. She told Miss Head that the days were passed when "typewriter" referred both to the machine and the woman who operated it. She would no longer answer to "Secretary" or deliver messages from anybody who called her that.

Two days later, Omar arrived. Omar was a courier. Not a deliveryman, a courier. Moira thought that sounded romantic, like something from a spy novel, until she heard Talia call him "Courier." Then she realized it was just FedEx for people like Miss Head who called people by their job titles.

This morning Miss Head was in a state before Omar even arrived with the week's worth of "Call Me-NOW" messages: Something in the papers, something she was expecting to find in the papers that wasn't there. Something about Gotham City.

Like any good secretary, Moira warned her fellow underling that 'The Suit' was in a foul mood. Omar didn't understand such warnings. It was his role to deliver his message if it meant his life. If his message displeased, that meant his life. If he returned an answer that displeased, that meant his life....

Omar had hoped for better things. Indeed, he was raised to be a soldier, to die for the Demon Head in battle, or even to be a palace guard and die defending his master's interests—but it wasn't to be. He was strong, but he was too short. A mere messenger, that was his fate.

He returned to his room at the Steven's Motel.

He had asked for simple lodgings, and they gave him this vast room all to himself. He said this was too much, he was a humble man—the boy at the desk now called him Mr. Humbleman, and he still had the vast room all to himself.

When his affair with Huntress came to light, Nightwing worked out his frustrations in a knockdown-dragout with Joker, Two-Face, Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn. No amount of psychobabble could substitute for a good adrenaline rush. Life and love were complicated; fight or flight was simple. Reducing himself to that primal core of instinct, blood and bile, that's what he needed. Except Batman had blocked that particular outlet for everybody just now.

It was Hell Month. Everybody knew it: every career criminal, every street thug, cop and stoolie, every drunken PI in a bad suit that could've staggered out of a cheesy film noir. Everybody knew in January, Batman went on some kind of crusade, probably a new resolve for the New Year or something. Whatever it was, you didn't want a piece of it. You just didn't. Crime went up in surrounding cities as crooks with bills to pay took their business elsewhere.

Only Nightwing, Alfred, and Robin knew the truth. Batman was inactive during the holidays. There was crime at that time of year, yes, but crime motivated by fear, not the kind he could discourage by instilling fear. The system had to deal with those criminals in its own way.

Batman returned to a full work schedule on January 2<sup>nd</sup>. The anniversary of his parents' death was January 21<sup>st</sup>. The period in-between these two dates was Hell Month, a time in which both Bruce and Batman became increasingly emotional, erratic and, if you were a criminal, dangerous.

Omar had continued to find the great city of Metropolis confusing. At dawn he would make his regular pilgrimage to LexCorp headquarters and deliver messages to the Great One's daughter. His duty done, he would return to his room until it was time to depart. On every visit to the LexCorp building, the handmaid smiled and talked with him as though he were an equal. One day she offered him 'coffee and a donut.'

Omar had not ventured into even fast-food restaurants. He was too low to take food prepared by others. He had subsisted thus far on microwave popcorn from the motel honor bar. But if it was presumptuous to pay others to prepare his food, it would be worse to refuse the handmaid's charity. He'd accepted the coffee and donut.

### January 15<sup>th</sup>, A-minus 6

The handmaid—no, that was wrong, not handmaid, “Miss Head’s secret... something”—Moira, had started introducing Omar to the delights of a great city. He had now experienced a donut, a movie, a basketball game, and the view from the observation deck at the Daily Planet. She also took him to “her gym” (better equipped than anything he had seen in the DEMON compound), and if on the next trip he could stay over the weekend, they would go to an amusement park.

Omar now considered delivery of messages to Talia as an unpleasant ordeal at the start of the day. When it was over, the day was his to wander, explore, and often to spend the lunch hour with Moira. They ate gyros in the plaza across from the LexCorp building, unaware they were watched from far above...

No sane being could say Superman was a coward.

A conversation with Bruce would be unpleasant, but that wouldn’t stop him if it were pressing. This was not. An agent of Ra’s Al Ghul was making regular visits to Metropolis. That alone wasn’t enough to warrant alerting Batman.

True, if it wasn’t Hell Month, he’d probably make the call anyway. But it was Hell Month. Who needed that.

Besides which, Superman was busy. Hell Month in Gotham meant more crime everywhere else.

The week saw an escalation in Bruce and Selina’s relationship that bore closer resemblance to a poker game than a romance. She treated her fears about “the love of my life” as a dare from her old adversary. She responded aggressively, moving some personal belongings into a drawer in his bedroom. He answered by giving her a workstation in the cave with a personal password. She took over a shelf in the bathroom. He gave her a hook in the costume vault. Just as they once set each other off violently, they were now daring each other with an outward show of a relationship growing more intimate.

The sex, however, was not growing more intimate—quite the reverse. Each had had a revelation about their relationship that made them gulp—their instinct was to slow down and instead they found themselves going faster. Apprehension and tension were a natural result and, because there was a game of Relationship Chicken being played, those feelings could find no outlet in daylight. They found expression in increasingly angry sex. The embrace that slammed against the wall, Selina chalked up to lust. The forceful landing on the floor -excessive passion. The thrusts that were more frustrated than tender awakened the cat. Selina was not one to become passive in the face of aggression. Her nails found scars on his back that might have been from Catwoman—or might have been anything. She taunted him. *“C’mon Dark Knight, I can take it. That the best you can do? Meow...”*

Alfred observed the domestic maneuvers: the shelf and the drawers and the hook, but knew nothing of the Bat and Cat game raging beneath the surface. He inadvertently added fuel to the fire when he began placing the day’s menus besides Selina’s place at breakfast.

That night, Selina was feeling more defensive than usual—Bruce had ‘love of my life,’ the accommodations in the cave, Barbara asking if Pachelbel’s Canon was too clichéd for a society wedding, and now Alfred positioning her as mistress of the house. She had some underthings in a drawer of his bureau and a bottle of moisturizer in the bathroom.

And it was her turn.

Catlike, feeling herself in an inferior position, she overcompensated. She searched for something deeply personal, not just intimacy, but vulnerability. She told him about her past...

It was true, what she’d answered when he first asked: She had no “origin” in the sense of one defining moment that made her Catwoman. But she hadn’t sprung out of the sidewalk at age 23 wearing a catsuit. She had a past. Now she told him what it was.

Bruce was stunned. It seemed to him this revelation must have taken the same resolve and soul-searching it took for him to tell about his parents. It required more than an empty gesture in answer. It needed more than some bauble he could buy with money... Well, there was one thing—and he knew it bothered her.

“There’s something I should tell you,” it began.

“Hm?” was the only encouragement he got. Selina was half-expecting a bat-like pronouncement that he already knew about her history.

“I think it’s time I tell you the truth about me and Talia.”

In the last moments observing a culprit, in that final second before Batman and Robin descend on their prey, there is an electric charge in the air which Dick once described as “fleas mating,” a silence that isn’t truly silent, an intense emptiness that draws attention to the slightest sound.

“I think it’s time I tell you the truth about me and Talia,” Bruce had said. And a fleas mating silence dropped like a tarp over the drawing room.

The silence continued until the fleas might be raising a family...

This was going to be a very sore subject, and Bruce hadn’t rehearsed what he would say. He paused to choose his words, and Batman’s danger-signals lit up the control panel.

*Just spit something out, Damn it!* his thoughts roared *Saying the name and letting it lay there is playing with gasoline and matches.*

*‘Did I mention you’re the love of my life,’* some corner of his brain suggested. *NO stalling for time!* Batman screamed, *Just spit it out and stop trying to be clever.*

“I never loved her.”

Selina stared.

The unbidden image that came to her was Rhett and Scarlett—“Ah nevah luvved Ashley...not *really*.” Surprisingly, Selina found herself cast as Rhett: “Well you’ve certainly done a remarkable imitation up ‘til now.”

Bruce knew none of this, he just saw her staring quietly, so he continued.

“She was...intriguing, beautiful, fascinating. I won’t pretend otherwise.”

“The bad girl thing,” Selina whispered softly, almost seductively, looking away into the fire.

"Maybe," he admitted. "Maybe she kept insisting we were in love so often that I let myself believe it a little."

She looked up skeptically. He explained.

"I think we all buy into the idea of tragic star-crossed lovers a little. That two people who are so totally wrong for each other must share some kind of doomed passion."

"So she said you were Romeo and Juliet, and you bought it, is that what you're saying?"

Bruce sighed. He never should have begun this without working out what to say.

"Look, Talia comes from a world of arranged marriages: you 'love' who you're told to. So, for her, this constant yakking about it is—"

The tension broke suddenly as Selina stopped him with a gentle touch on the wrist and an enormous grin:

"Yakking?"

"Constant."

He went on, unaware that it was the choice of words and not the concept she questioned:

"She has to say 'Beloved' at least four times in a typical paragraph. Haven't you ever noticed, forty percent of our conversation has to be her pining how in love we are and she's my destiny."

He was stopped this time by a malevolent glare.

"No," Selina said flatly, "I've never actually had occasion to do a Beloved-count in your conversations with the demonspawn."

In Bruce's mind, the glare from Selina wasn't half as threatening as the one from Batman. If he didn't pull out of this, but fast, he'd be sent to the showers and Batman would finish the conversation himself.

"What I mean is: she thinks declaring herself my 'great love' will make it so. She wants a way out with her father and thinks I'm it—so she's decided she 'loves me' and she thinks she can impose what she wants on reality. If she just says it often enough, it'll be true."

The glare softened a little. He was getting through.

"Why are you telling me this?" Selina asked gently.

"I don't know. Needed to be said, I think, after..."

"...after 'the love of my life?'"

"Yeah, that was...that was... ah..." Bruce rubbed the bridge of his nose as though trying to squeeze the thought out. "That was more the kind of thing she'd say. It's not my style."

"Oh, I noticed that immediately," Selina commented with some flippancy.

Bruce smirked.

He was about to remark on the difference. With Selina—with Catwoman—their feelings were more evident the more they denied them. He never got to say it, because her demeanor changed abruptly...

"Wait a minute, let me get this straight: you callously encouraged that pitiful little twit's deluded fantasies, which you didn't fully believe in yourself—Why? To keep a foot in the door at DEMON HQ?"

Put that way, it sounded cruel...

Batman could be cruel.

He would use a criminal's fear for his own ends, and he would use this one's romantic obsessions. He *did* try to hide it from himself with the notion that he might truly love her—but that illusion was no longer possible. He was in a real and loving relationship that made him happy; it was impossible to not see the sick, dysfunctional one with Talia for what it was.

Selina's remark still hung in the air:

"You callously encouraged that pitiful twit's deluded fantasies, which you didn't fully believe in yourself?"

Reluctantly, he nodded.

"You preyed on that dimwit's credulous simplicity?"

Ashamed, he nodded again.

"You slut."

He glanced up.

She was joking.

Impossible woman.

"You said it yourself, once," Bruce groped for something to say and stumbled over the truth. "I'll use anyone or anything to achieve the goal."

"You led her on."

"I did very little leading on. I may not contradict her much but that's not the same as actually initiating..." He stopped at a pair of familiar green eyes reveling in his discomfort. It struck a chord: "Why am I explaining this to you of all people." He was smiling now, and got a smile in return.

"Amoral jackass," she teased.

"Judgmental bitch."



*No matter what the future brings...*  
— AS TIME GOES BY, Casablanca

### **January 16<sup>th</sup>, A-minus 5**

Nightwing was desperate for some action. The mind-numbing deconstruction of thoughts and feelings past was making his teeth hurt. He longed to sink his fist into the soft solar plexus of a goon that deserved it.

He didn't want to ask Babs for a lead, however.

He decided he could do so indirectly through Robin. Making up for his previous rudeness, he stoically let Spoiler finish her explanation that the language of the famous Robert Burns version of Auld Lang Syne is more sophisticated and elegant than the original folk song would have been...

When she finished, Nightwing tentatively asked his favor: Could they call Oracle and learn the whereabouts of a good old-fashioned brawl?

They did. But by the time Nightwing arrived, the last guy standing was booked for drunk and disorderly.

Robin and Spoiler called in again. This time Nightwing promised to take over their patrol on Valentine's Day.

That call sent him to the docks—where an illegal shipment of drugs turned out to be an illegal shipment of Cuban refugees. INS agents were in place and the bust promised more red tape than bloodied lips.

On the third return to Robin and Spoiler, they were waiting with a list of demands: Nightwing would have Spoiler's motorcycle detailed, get them tickets to the U2 concert at the Garden, next time Big-B called a 'be here unless you're dead' meeting, 'Wing would get them out of it. And oh yes, if THIS call didn't pan out and he came back a fourth time tonight, he would bring a double order of hot wings from WingDings, 2 diet sodas, and a mocha shake.

He agreed. It didn't matter; he was passed caring.

The final address brought him to a West Side rooftop where, instead of any visible crime scene, he observed a distant flash of light. Flash, flash, flicker, flash flicker—it was a modified Morse Code only the bat-family used.

S-I-L-L-Y-B-I-R-D---Y---D-I-D-N-T---U---C-A-L-L---Y-O-U-R-S-E-L-F

Can't pull one over on the all-seeing Oracle.

Sillybird?

Sensing—hoping—that maybe he wasn't in as much trouble as he'd thought, Nightwing shot a line and swung in the direction of Barbara's apartment.

It's been wisely observed that, while Bruce was at the core of Hell-Month, he seemed less aware of it than others around him. Those who knew only Bruce Wayne knew he was bad-tempered. Those who knew he was Batman knew he was more brutal. All he knew was that he hurt. As the day approached, he remembered more often that it was coming, and his stomach would churn and he'd push the thought away. Then he'd

look at it, lurking in some corner of his mind. Ugly and foul. Waiting for its moment to return.

Then he would snap at Alfred or snap some thug's wrist. It was all the same, a reflex. Hurt for hurt. Pain for pain.

The foul thing was never deterred. He couldn't hurt it. Couldn't frighten it. It was. His parents were dead. He saw them die and that left him this wretched, driven, tormented... Batman.

He clenched and unclenched his fist reflexively.

Dick was avoiding him since the fight in the cave.

Alfred was walking on eggshells.

Tim was avoiding him *and* walking on eggshells.

Lucius was sending e-mails instead of meeting in person.

Selina stood him up at d'Annunzio's.

He clenched his fist again...

He told her the truth about Talia. Maybe he should have told her the truth about her instead. What was the more important revelation: that this nothing, insignificant dalliance in his past was a nothing, insignificant dalliance, or that he trusted her?

He unclenched his fist ...it was stiff and sore. And it ached to punch something.

In the four minutes between the invitation addressing him as "Sillybird" and reaching Barbara's terrace, Nightwing reconsidered his position:

He was not in trouble with Barbara. The girl could be prickly, sarcastic and even acid-tongued, but she would not summon him to an ass-chewing with a teasing endearment like "Sillybird."

Why did he think he was in trouble, anyway? Felon's guilt, maybe. He felt like a heel when he saw those notes from Clancy because it looked like maybe she read more into their flirting than he'd ever intended.

But he hadn't done anything wrong.

Had he?

So the women talked? So what? That didn't mean he was in trouble...

It was awful to think he might have hurt Barbara—it was awful the way he turned right around and attacked Bruce. "Okay," he thought, "screwing up a bit lately, and that's why I'm making mountains out of molehills. Barbara talked to Clancy, Clancy talked to Barbara. No big."

He opened the terrace door and removed his mask as he entered Barbara's apartment. He was Dick here, not Nightwing. Bruce taught him the importance of those gestures from the first training sessions in the cave. Mask on was Robin/mask off was Dick. It was part of the discipline, but it was also a courtesy to him and to Alfred.

Barbara acknowledged his arrival with a raised hand, but kept her back to him and went on typing. It occurred to him that she seldom left her workstation during these visits, seldom powered down the monitor and stopped being Oracle.

"Barb, I'd like to talk. You think maybe..." He let the sentence trail off, expecting a muttered complaint.

Instead she turned from the keyboard with a warm smile and chirped: "I guess Gotham and cyberspace can spare me for a night. Howya doin, Studmuffin."

He beamed.

"That's the gal I fell in love with—I don't get to see enough of you."

The Clancy issue was dispensed with in exactly seven sentences: Barbara wasn't a psychotic demonspawn, after all. She wasn't thrilled when she realized his landlady had more than a professional interest in Dick, but she accepted his assurance that there was nothing deeper or warmer than ordinary friendship. They ordered takeout, and popped Casablanca into the VCR.

Abruptly, after Ingrid Bergman and not Humphrey Bogart urged Sam to play *As Time Goes By*, Barbara snapped off the television.

"What do you mean, you don't get to see enough of her?"

Dick blinked.

"Um, huh?"

"You said 'that's the gal I fell in love with, I don't get to see enough of her.'"

"Did I say that? Well, I guess I meant—I don't know, I meant—you were so cute and smiling and happy to see me—"

"Whereas I'm usually what?"

Now, Dick realized, he was in trouble...

All right, he decided, if he was going to be in trouble, let it be for something he really felt and not for some wild misunderstanding about Clancy: He was in trouble—or expecting to be in trouble—more often than he'd like. Barbara was crusty, prickly, sarcastic, dyspeptic, curmudgeonly and downright bitchy more often than not. She didn't used to be this way.

"Before the chair," she whispered so low he didn't hear it.

"I know that girl is still in there," he was saying, "under all the porcupine needles. And I'm always looking for her. But..."

"But instead you're stuck with me," Barbara spat bitterly. Bitter was the last thing she wanted to be.

She wanted people, she wanted Dick especially, to forget the chair, to forget what happened with the Joker...to see *HER*. So she acted strong, invulnerable. And too often, it only made them more conscious of all that had happened to her, of how much she'd changed.

"I can't be that girl anymore, Dick. She's gone. Joker killed her." She removed the locket and held it out. "If that's who you want to marry, you should take this back and just..."

"Whoa, whoa, waitaminute, stop, slowdown, NO...I said 'that's the girl I fell in love with.' *SHE* is *YOU*, Barbara. You-past but still you. I asked You-present to marry me and that means all of you: you then, you now, and you every possible you-future. I'm pretty sure that's in the contract somewhere: for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and health. That means whatever might happen, whatever we might become, we're a set now. That's the deal." He took the locket from her hand and held the chain up, poised to lower back around her head. "You up for it?"

Selina awoke uneasily with no memory of having gone to sleep. That was never a good sign in Gotham City. It was even worse if one woke up *not* in Gotham City but in a private plane 30,000 feet over the China Sea.

By the time the plane landed in Mongolia, one might figure things were as bad as they were going to get. But then if one found out their host was Ra's Al Ghul, they might consider that things could, in fact, get worse.

This was Selina's thought. She delivered a glare that would have reduced Batman to ash. Ra's appeared not to notice, then asked if she was partial to venison or game.

For someone like Selina, it was a bit of a letdown. Brought before the evil one himself, the great Ra's al Ghul, practically immortal, megalomaniac, father of the demonspawn, damn near took out the entire JLA—and he asked “the chicken or the beef?”

*How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is  
To have a thankless child!*  
—King Lear

#### January 17<sup>th</sup>, A-minus 4

"I told ya all I know, I sweulgh—" Snook's naturally raspy wheeze was already growing thick with blood and snot when this last blow doubled him over, retching hopelessly. "I told ya everything," he whined. "Just let me die now."

The gloved fist that held him by his hair released it abruptly and Snook crumpled into a whimpering ball. Batman thought it would be a kindness to deliver a final nerve pinch and give the miserable snitch a few hours of oblivion. He was halted by a dark boot positioned between him and the cowering Snook.

"You mind telling me what you're doing here?" Nightwing asked simply. "Snook's a very accommodating fellow in the normal course of things, aren't you, buddy. It isn't necessary to—" as he moved away, Batman delivered a brutal kick, knocking Snook into the wall.

"-to do that," Nightwing concluded. Dick had screwed up Hell Month right out of the chute, and another scene with Bruce was the last thing he wanted. A scene with Batman was the *very* last thing he wanted. But he couldn't overlook this. Hell Month was Hell Month, and the Gotham stooges might be in hiding, but that did not justify Batman coming to Bludhaven and beating his best snitch nearly into a coma.

"Look what you've done there, that arm—that's 14 stitches at least—that *I'm* gonna be paying for."

Batman looked at Nightwing defiantly. With frightening economy of movement his arm shot out and lifted the helpless Snook off the ground, dragging a bleeding arm along the ragged brick wall until it was probably cut open to 16 or 18 stitches and looked even worse.

"WHAT GIVES?" Nightwing screamed.

"Nothing that concerns you. Stay out of it," was the only reply.

"Happy to," Nightwing answered. "Just keep it out of my town."

Batman glared.

Nightwing glared.

Batman kicked Snook into the wall again. Glared again. And vanished.

"January 17<sup>th</sup>," Nightwing muttered. "A-minus 4."

The absence of a third place at Ra's al Ghul's dinner table assured Selina that Talia would not be joining them. All the evidence seemed to confirm Ra's assertions that his daughter was not in residence at the compound, that she had no role in his present operations, and that they were, in fact, not on speaking terms at the present time.

It sounded juicy: Geraldo in Hell. Today on Sally Jessie Raphael, family squabbles among the undead. "My daughter let my enemy out of his holding cell and now he's stymied my plans to conquer the earth." But Selina couldn't get to any of these juicy details because Ra's wouldn't get past the part where Talia didn't return his phone calls.

Selina eyed her host, trying to get a handle on him. It was cute in a way, the megalomaniac complaining that his daughter never called, never wrote, the criminal mastermind that couldn't get a phone message past a secretary.... Still, this man was a dangerous power. Everybody said so.

Well, not quite *everybody*. Joker always said Ra's was an overrated hairdo. Most chalked it up to jealousy: there were those who said Ra's and not Joker was Batman's greatest foe, and Joker took that kind of thing personally. Nevertheless, Selina thought, the clown might just have a point on this one. He might even have lowballed it. What had Ra's accomplished, really? His most distinguishing feature as a Rogue was that he was his daughter's father. That and being older than dirt. Oh, there's a leader for the resume: remembers when turbans were the big new thing.

Selina smirked at this thought. Then, noticing that Ra's was looking at her, she let the smirk morph easily into a smile and nodded at the pheasant. Ra's smiled back, and Selina was satisfied. He was another rogue, and he could be handled like the others could. This one prided himself on being more civilized than common brawling villains.

"Come now, Catwoman," he had said "you're not going to be priggish like the heroes, are you, and insist on a dank cell in the basement. You're to be my guest for the few hours or days until the Detective arrives. You may as well enjoy a proper bedroom and a good meal."

"All right, then," Selina had thought, "humor him and handle him." She was not one to insist on a dank cell in what Ra's called the basement but she was sure anyone else would call a dungeon. He wanted to treat this like a dinner party instead of a kidnapping, that'd be just fine. Pass the potatoes, father of demonspawn.

"An emissary of Ra's Al Ghul has been in and out of Metropolis at least a dozen times this year! Did you NOT KNOW, or did you NOT THINK IT WAS WORTH MENTIONING!"

Superman disliked confrontations, particularly with colleagues. Man of Steel Invulnerability notwithstanding, he was raised by soft-spoken farmers who taught him that reasonable people could talk out their differences without resorting to:

"I LIKE TO THINK THAT IF SOME FLUNKY OF LUTHOR'S STARTED RUNNING A UPS SERVICE OUT OF GOTHAM, I WOULD GIVE YOU A HEADS UP!"

"No," Superman answered carefully, "I'd say if an agent of Luthor's set up shop in Gotham, you'd pound him into a 1 x 1 cube and send him to me 2<sup>nd</sup> day ground."

"You think you're in a position to criticize how I work when you've been HARBORING A MINION OF RA'S AL GHUL!"

"I'm monitoring the situation. Waiting to see if something would happen."

"It's happened. Tell me what you know."

"What? What's happened?"

Batman glared.

And glared.

And glared.

In the spirit of Hell Month, A-minus-4, the Man of Steel caved like a cardboard UPS carton in the rain.

The flight to Mongolia was torture. Batman was adept at juggling many thoughts at once, planning for countless contingencies. Such mental dexterity made it possible to relive a dozen moments from his past with Selina while visualizing a dozen grim scenarios the future might hold.

*"The easy way or the hard way, Catwoman"... "Why Batman, how hard do you want it to get?"*

What if he lost her? She could be dead already for all he knew.

*"You're part of the night, just like me." ... "You're a thief."*

Dead like his parents...

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

That was a bigger trust moment than telling her his real name... it was bigger than the L-word, and it was certainly bigger than knowing she didn't take some trinket from the historical museum. Everything he is, was, and would ever be stemmed from that one fact, and he told her. And now Ra's had her. She could be dead already...like his parents. Like Jason...

*"The life we've chosen, it's not easy. And it's not safe..."*

It's not safe. It's not safe. It's not safe. She could be dead already.

*"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"... "I don't know about that. 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."*

*"The easy way or the hard way, Catwoman?"... "Why Batman, how hard do you want it to get?"*

Alone again. He'd be alone again. He opened himself up—he smiled, he called her kitten, he said the L-Word, he allowed himself a happiness he didn't deserve and now the cosmos was rising like a serpent to swallow him whole.

*HOW HARD DO YOU WANT IT TO GET?*

Oh God.

When Batman arrived at the DEMON compound, he found them having dinner.

He'd been frantic... and they were at dinner. He found Gotham snitches were in hiding for Hell Month, so he'd gone to Bludhaven. He'd beaten Nightwing's pet contact practically into a coma, then had words with 'Wing, then had more words with Clark when it turned out the Boy Scout was holding back information on DEMON activity in Metropolis. He'd been... scared... scared for her and scared of losing her...

And they were *at dinner*.

Comparing notes, from the sound of it, about the slanders of the American media:

*"It's the visuals I most object to," Ra's was saying, "they made me look like a villain."*

*"No, no," Selina answered, "It wasn't a flattering picture, I'll give you that. But the character assassination is much worse. They had me stupid, homicidal, psychotic, and playing with guns, and don't get me started on what they're saying about me now."*

"A minor libel, in my opinion, compared to the visuals. Really, my dear, it's fair to say you are a stunningly beautiful woman, and that creature depicted in the newspapers denies you your most magnificent characteristics... Wouldn't you agree, Detective?"

Batman preferred picking his own moment to reveal himself. He stepped out from behind a service partition with hatred in his heart. Ra's continued addressing him, enjoying his triumph immensely:

"Indeed, I nearly executed the agent who brought her here. For this bewitching creature simply could not be that Jane Doe I read of in the Gotham Post."

"And you had your agents kidnap her because...?" Batman asked ominously.

"As a means to secure your presence, of course. That is how one makes an appointment to see you, Detective, by taking one of your inner circle."

"It's beneath you to call my secretary?"

Ra's wasn't going to acknowledge this. He turned back to Selina, but continued to address Batman:

"This one is an improvement over those impudent boys, incidentally. They would not have made very pleasant dinner companions, not after our last meeting."

Batman smirked unpleasantly.

"That's why you took Selina? Because she wasn't there when you made a fool of yourself over Black Canary?"

"I heard all about that," Selina shot out. She was irked at being discussed as if she wasn't there, and she wanted in on the confrontation. "They told me! Got a little worked up after that last dip in the pit, I take it."

"It happens sometimes. My men overreacted; they had not seen it before."

"Because you killed off all those who saw it the last time?" Batman ventured.

"The Italian civil wars killed them, Detective; it was 1420. In any case," he turned back to Selina, "whatever you may have heard, my dear, you did not make an issue of it. This, I appreciate. No, you cannot escape being 'the civil one' in this particular instance. The boys' mocking would have been quite insupportable."

Selina was taken aback. The civil one? No one had ever accused Catwoman of such a thing.

"What do you want, Ra's?" Batman spat in a most uncivil tone.

"The Asian Properties Wayne Enterprises acquired in a corporate takeover two months ago."

Bruce stared, and Ra's continued.

"I'm perfectly willing to pay fair market value, and I wish to make sure you won't refuse simply because it is I who am asking."

"That's the most ridiculous load of bull I've ever heard, even from you. What do you want?"

Ra's raised an eyebrow, then tried a new approach.

"Perhaps I was curious and wished to meet the lady?"

"WHAT DO YOU WANT, RA'S?"

"My daughter is sure to come to me sooner or later and ask me to intervene, and I took this opportunity to..."

"WHAT DO YOU WANT, RA'S?"

"Detective, I will thank you not to bellow like a bad actor in my house—"

**“RA’S! WHAT DO YOU WANT?”**

There was a long silence, then the truth:

“I want it understood that I was not involved in my daughter’s attempts to frame this young woman.”

Selina’s eyes grew wide at the statement. She was ready to do some yelling herself, but Batman was now calm. He had sat down at the table, and poured a glass of wine from the pitcher. His tone became conversational:

“Oh, I know that, Ra’s. Cat’s eye crown? Please. You couldn’t be that obvious if you tried.”

“Exactly. This is very embarrassing, Detective. I truly don’t know what to say.”

Selina was sputtering now...

“Oh, I can imagine,” Batman was saying to the man who, though an enemy, his greatest, was nevertheless a mastermind and a criminal genius. “None of it rubbed off, did it? You, then Luthor. She didn’t pick up... anything.”

“That was a favor to me, you know. Lex taking her. I contributed more than a little to his campaign. You see, I was proud last time she left, finally showing a little spunk, I thought. A promising sign. But look what she goes and does: still uses my network to spy on your butler, still uses my network to stage this cat-crime, still uses my money to buy her penthouse in Metropolis...”

“You’re kidding.”

“Truly! But my name, that she won’t use. Beneath her! She said my book was an embarrassment and now that she’s an executive she couldn’t be associated with something so lowbrow and florid. I mean, really, Detective, ‘florid.’ From *Talia!* I don’t have to tell you...”

“Excuse me,” Selina interrupted, but was ignored.

Batman was nodding and said, “For that matter, the new name—*Talia Head?* What is this a James Bond movie?”

“Excuse me,” Selina tried again.

“Indeed. Don’t think all the guards here aren’t having fun with that one. They don’t say it in front of me—only you would do that—but I know what’s said in my house.”

Barbara’s call for “a little estrogen solidarity” echoed, inexplicably, in Selina’s mind. There was no power on earth that would make her *defend* the demonspawn...

...Ra’s was now announcing that he got a bum rap with this chauvinism charge—he had no particular insistence on a male heir...

There was no power on earth that would make Selina defend *or feel sorry* for the demonspawn.

...Ra’s was saying he let Talia think that to avoid hurting her feelings. She wasn’t up to the job. Just look at her performance to date....

There was no power that would make Selina defend the demonspawn, but just to be safe, she’d wait in the Batwing.

As she left, she heard Batman proposing a deal: He was taking steps to get “the little pest” out of their hair. If Ra’s would keep her there, it would be known that DEMON had no part in the Catwoman frame-up. And he’d throw in those Asian Properties at cost.

"Men are pigs," Selina muttered, as she opened the hatch of the Batwing... to find a DEMON flunky trying to stuff himself in a small hassock beneath the passenger seat.

"America! You are the guests from America! Basketball! Superman! Big Mac and Fries!"

Not a time to split hairs about whether she was a guest or a prisoner, Selina thought. She confirmed her country of origin. She assured him that *Star Wars Episode 2* was not out yet. She could supply no first hand information about Superman or whether the Metropolis Marvels made the playoffs.

"Swept the series against Cleveland, playing the Star City Rebels for the championship a week from Sunday," a deep voice intoned. And Omar became the first minion of Ra's Al Ghul to smile on first meeting Batman.

### January 19<sup>th</sup>, A-minus 2

LEXCREEP: YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A DERANGED PSYCHOPATH TO WORK  
HERE, BUT IT HELPS...

"And if it gets me fired, I don't care anymore," Moira muttered, saving the new phrase to her screensaver. Miss Head no longer screeched or threw things when the Gotham papers didn't contain the news she was looking for. She just grumbled that she'd been too subtle, thought he'd be smart enough to figure it out. Then she'd scream at Moira because the faxes from R&D were smudged. A suit's mood swings were part of the job, though. The truth was, Moira missed Omar. She missed how nothing fazed him. The most outrageous details of her day at Lexcorp he shrugged off as the things that go on among suits. None of it could touch him. Once he left a room, whatever had gone on there had no reality for him. He never once complained about a bad day.

She also missed showing him the city, seeing simple things through his eyes. He took nothing for granted. What a gift to be like that, to take pleasure in a gyro on a sunny afternoon and not have the aftermath of a suit's morning tantrum hanging round your neck all day.

"Good morning, Miss Moira," a familiar accent intoned, "what is a de-rang pessy-chop-path?"

Moira looked up and beamed.

"That's 'deranged psychopath.' It means a crazy suit. Like Miss Head."

"You should not display such messages on your desk. It is very dangerous."

"Oh, I don't care. I can get another job. Although, if you're going to be coming around again, I guess it wouldn't be so bad to stick around."

Omar shook his head 'No' but smiled as he did so.

"No, I will not be come round again. This is my last delivery here to the Great One's daugh—" he caught himself and remembered he must speak as Americans speak. "To Miss Head."

"Oh." Moira looked crushed.

"But I will to be staying in Metropolis. I have, how do you say it, changed jobs. That is why this is last message."

Moira looked much happier at this. She took the parcel, an audio cassette, to Miss Head with the rest of the day's mail, then hurried back to the reception area to hear about Omar's new circumstances. It turned out this last delivery was a favor to someone who pulled some strings and got him a job at the Daily Planet....

The sedate offices of LexCorp were suddenly shaken by an earsplitting scream.

*...: this is frankly embarrassing, Detective, I don't know what to say ...*

Talia threw Lex Luthor's priceless Pre-Columbian rattle at his antique Baccarat water pitcher. The cassette played on...

*...: none of it rubbed off, did it? ...*

Her beloved's voice. She threw a Faberge inkwell at a Picasso print.

*...: ...a favor to me, Lex taking her... ...*

She screamed.

*...: Talia Head? What is this a James Bond movie? ...*

She wailed.

*...: don't need a male heir especially, but I need a competent one ...*

Talia tore the cassette player's plug from the wall and hurled it out the window... rather, she threw the player *at* the window—the shatterproof high-rise window—from whence it bounced onto the thick Persian carpet with an anti-climactic *swudt*. Failing to produce the satisfying sound of breaking glass, Talia pounded the player into the telephone until both were a pile of useless electronic giblets.

### **January 20<sup>th</sup>, A-minus 1**

The unforeseen consequence of playing Romantic Chicken was that, by the end of it, Bruce and Selina found themselves in a dramatically more intimate relationship than either had consciously intended. Each step in the escalation had been real and heartfelt, but there was an undercurrent of responding to a dare. That element dissolved, for Selina, right around the words 'never loved Talia.'

The new circumstances raised a delicate question, one more delicate than faces under a mask or what one was doing in the Summer of '85...

The Nightmares.

Every night they had slept together, Bruce (or perhaps Batman) had had a nightmare. Occasionally he thrashed around but more often he groaned softly, clenched his fist, and pounded it into the blankets.

Every night they slept together... The implication was unmistakable. He'd taken Catwoman into his bed and some part of him would never forgive either of them. The dreams were growing worse the last few weeks, undoubtedly because of the new intimacy, Selina thought.

She should tell him—not let him sit there twisting his hand not even knowing why it was sore.

Yeah right, she thought, tell him. How would that go exactly: “Dear, you know you’re a few cards shy of a deck right? Guess what, I’m the cause. And by the way, have I called you a judgmental jackass recently?”

Although...

“Judgmental jackass” struck a chord...

...the unvarnished truth had worked fairly well up ‘til now.

WAYNE

Thomas, beloved husband

Martha, beloved wife

*"They were lovely and pleasant in their lives and in their deaths they were not divided"*

### January 21<sup>st</sup>, Anniversary

Bruce placed two perfect but unopened rosebuds beneath the quote on the headstone, then stood erect and began the ritual contemplation of his parents, their deaths, and the rededication of his life to righting this wrong. No, nothing could 'right' the wrong, nothing would bring them back... The rededication of his life to... to the Mission.

The Mission. Good word, just the right touch of sacred overtones. What exactly was 'the Mission?'

The Quest, then.

Ah, like Don Quixote. Quest for what?

This wasn't right. The Anniversary—the pilgrimage to the gravesite in daylight as Bruce and the alley at nightfall as Batman—was a time for solemn contemplation and reverence. Not splitting hairs about what this word or that meant...

"Words matter," his mother taught him early. "They have power. Your words can make others happy or sad. They can persuade. They can topple empires. They can change the world. They can even change *a life*. Choose them with care, Bruce. Always."

"No words can express what I feel since that night, Mom."

"They can't? English is a rich language, Bruce. The language of Shakespeare—and he tackled every thought and feeling human beings experience. I seriously doubt you've come up with something new. So, if you can't find the words, maybe you're not looking hard enough."

"The looking hurts, Mom."

"Of course it does, Bruce. I wish I could spare you that, Son, but it's part of being alive. And I wouldn't spare you that. Better that you hurt than that you died that night... Bruce? Don't you shut down like that, my boy. You are *ALIVE* and *IN THE WORLD*, the sooner you accept that fact, the better... Bruce Thomas Wayne, you pull yourself together this instant. We've a lot to talk through and I'm not going to stop every 10 seconds and repeat that one point. You're alive. It should be obvious to a so-called great detective."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Alright then, what are you thinking, right now?"

"That that's the kind of thing *she* says. 'World's greatest detective' ... She loves going back to that anytime I screw up."

In his mind's eye, Bruce saw his mother smile.

"If she does, I'm sure it's because, like your father, you place too much weight on intellect compared to your feelings."

"That's not it. She just likes throwing me off-balance."

"Well, I dare say you know her better than I... You had another fight, I take it, before coming here today?"

"Nightmares?"

"Yeah. Every night I sleep over."

"Just do me a favor, Selina, and get over yourself. The dreams are... so not about you."

"You know about them?"

"I've only had them since I was 10."

"Oh. I just thought that..."

"Yeah, I know what you thought. Believe me, Kitten, you are not that big a factor in my life. You don't have that kind of power. You think it'd destroy me if you betrayed me and left? You think I care if you up and vanish some night? I've been alone my whole life, you think I'm afraid of being alone again?"

"Yes, we had another fight. Pretty bad one."

"Bruce, I swear, when this day comes around you have no more judgment than a popinjay. That wasn't a bad fight. That was a very endearing little squabble borne of insecurity and very genuine affection."

"Mom, you have some very odd ideas about fighting and affection."

His mother laughed at him.

"Bruce, she was afraid she was hurting you. And you got quite a scare the other day when you thought you could lose her. You behaved quite abominably as a result—that's becoming quite a habit with you, I notice.... Bruce, why do you think it is that you haven't been able to go through your usual vows about Justice here today?"

"I don't know, Mom."

"Too easy. Think about it."

"Because of what happened with Selina?"

"Still too easy."

"I don't know, I guess maybe I..."

"Bruce, you have to make peace with the living before you can make peace with the dead."

"Selina?"

"Yes. And the other one, too."

"Not Talia?"

"Sending that tape was the act of a cad, Bruce. I am heartily ashamed of you. That a son of mine would treat women as you have done."

"Mom, I'm sorry, but believe me, with Talia you don't know what you're talking about. It'd be nice if I could be a hero and end it like a gentleman, but she's not like that. Anything short of a smack in the head she'd spin into some fantasy that Batman is..."

"I will not tolerate this Bruce, I will not. You don't love her, that's fine. But any fellow being is entitled to a minimum degree of respect and consideration and I will not have you concocting these monstrous Batman scenarios to justify anything you want to do to people...."

"You don't understand, Mom. You really don't."

"I don't? Then why don't you explain it to me, Bruce."

"...Why don't I explain that I've made your death into a cheap excuse for being a shit of a human being."

“My poor baby. Where do you get such ideas? I’m not happy about the way you treat other people, Bruce, but I’m most disappointed about the way you treat yourself. You go now—make your peace with the living. Then you’ll be able to come back here and say what you need to say.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

### January 22<sup>nd</sup>, A + 1

Moira hadn’t connected Talia’s interest in the Gotham newspapers with the move on Wayne Enterprises the previous year, not until Bruce Wayne called from the Metropolis heliport demanding an emergency ten minutes on Miss Head’s morning schedule.

Bruce Wayne. Some said the only thing worse than working at LexCorp would be working for that notorious playboy. But the figure that stepped into the executive reception area didn’t seem like a pinch’n’leer. He seemed like any other suit—a little older than she expected, or maybe just tired.

“Mr. Bruce Wayne to see you, Ms. Hea—” The buzzer unlocking the inner office cut off Moira’s announcement.

Wayne stepped through the doorway, and there was an immediate crash of Wedgewood hitting plaster.

Bruce had expected to dodge pottery when he first entered the office. He wasn’t quite prepared for the sight of an office already trashed by three days’ worth of tantrums. The apology, such as he’d rehearsed it, did not seem quite equal to the affront that caused this kind of devastation.

Still, he reminded himself, this was Talia. He was prepared to take responsibility for his actions, but he wouldn’t let this become personal. It wouldn’t do to admit to anything or do any heartfelt soul-searching in front of her. She was too eager to take anything short of cruelty as a pledge of true love.

Well... if not cruelty, *honesty*. Direct and clear: They were nothing to each other. They were not going to be anything to each other. If he picked an unfortunate way to deliver that message, it was only because he didn’t trust himself to see her face to face...

She began to smile at these words.

...without tearing her head from her body with his bare hands, he concluded.

“But, Beloved, I—”

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice, Talia?” he cut her off. “Did you think it would escape my attention that you picked Hell Month to pull this stunt?”

“Beloved, I only wanted—”

“You only wanted to make cheap and sentimental use of a very deep personal tragedy to serve your own selfish ends. A tragedy you only know of, I might add, because your father knows.”

“You must remind yourself always of who my father is, Beloved, to summon the will to stay away from me.”

Bruce sighed, exasperated and exhausted.

"I give up. I'm out of ideas. What's it going to take? Tell me how to make you understand! We're nothing. We have no future. We don't have much of a past. What there was is finished, and it wasn't enough to get worked up about losing."

"You must speak in such terms to convince yourself, my Beloved, not me."

Bruce did give up. It was hopeless. She would read anger as passion, pity as tenderness, exasperation as lust. There was no hope for it. He'd tried his best. She would believe whatever she wanted.

He left her inner office, shaking his head sadly. He left the outer office... then stopped, backed up a step and saw Moira's screensaver.

LEXCREEP: YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A DERANGED PSYCHOPATH TO WORK HERE BUT IT HELPS

Bruce faxed Moira's resume to Lucius Fox from WE-One, the Wayne Enterprises Corporate jet. By the time the plane landed at Gotham Executive Airport, Lucius had confirmed her new position heading an assistant training program at Wayne Enterprises—the Metropolis branch.

Lucius repeated that it was a pity not to have a program like this at the corporate headquarters.

Bruce repeated that he had tried, but the lady was emphatic about remaining in Metropolis. "Her fella" worked for the Daily Planet, she said.

Lucius hinted that the real reason was that a secretary at that level probably heard stories about the CEO of Wayne Enterprises and was wary about accepting a job he had offered because he liked her screensaver. The branch office was safely in another city. In a year or two, once she realized the job was legitimate, they could move her to Gotham.

Bruce yawned loudly into the car-phone and said he would take the rest of the day off. Lucius sighed, hung up, and began rearranging the afternoon meetings.

Arriving home, Bruce walked through the kitchen, picked up the morning newspaper from his untouched breakfast tray, poured himself a glass of orange juice, walked though to the butler's pantry and took Alfred's elevator down to the Batcave. He logged in automatically, then dropped the newspaper onto the keypad. One of the automated monitoring routines threw up a map of the city indicating a crime connected to one of his themed enemies. A yellow circle was superimposed on the map with a zoom in on the museum district. Beneath it were the words:

Gotham Historical Museum:

Roman Mosaics... leopards in the coliseum... ..valued at \$450,000

The newspaper headline stared up at him:

CAT-CRIME IN GOTHAM!

**January 23<sup>rd</sup>, A + 2**

It would be fair to say Deputy-Commissioner Morrison looked at Batman like he was insane. The break in at the historical museum was weeks ago and they *had* called him. The other one? There was no other one. If there was another cat crime they would have signaled and told him, but there wasn't! Of course they would know, they were the police!

Batman gave up and went directly to the museum. It sometimes happened that this new commissioner could not supply more information than the newspapers—but this was the first time he'd offered less.

As Batman landed on the roof, the numb calm he'd maintained since the cave began to buckle.

This wasn't happening. It was a bad dream.

And reality tore abruptly through the haze: *Nightmares.*

*For godssake, Selina, I didn't mean it,* his thoughts ran as he replayed that last fight before the cemetery:

*"The dreams are... so not about you... Believe me, Kitten, you are not that big a factor in my life."*

*(I didn't mean it.)*

*"You think it'd destroy me if you betrayed me and left?"*

*(Oh god, I didn't mean it. Don't you know that? Couldn't you tell?)*

He removed a ventilation hood and entered through an air duct, just as she must have done.

At the grate above the Roman gallery, he saw the indentation of claw marks at the seam.

*You think I care if you up and vanish some night. I do.*

*You think I'm afraid of being alone again? I am.*

I dropped to the floor, not caring much if there were floor sensors to trip. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I made out, quite distinctly, a display of four mosaics depicting exotic animals in the coliseum. There was a rhinoceros, an elephant, a zebra, and in the spot where the leopards should be were... leopards. Gold tiles, broken up every so often with blacks faded to gray faded over the centuries... But... those were supposed to be stolen...

I took a closer look and saw one of the spots wasn't right—too regular and too black—electrical tape. I peeled it off and a note, folded and refolded to a tiny square, dropped at my feet.

*"No, I didn't take it. Why would I? Because of you?"*

I looked back at the leopards. Another too-square spot, and another note:

*"You're not that big a factor in my life."*

And another.

*"You don't have that kind of power."*

And finally:

*"You presumptuous arrogant bastard."*

I tried her apartment. I tried Barbara, I tried Dick, I tried Tim. I snooped around the Iceberg, and Two-Face's loft over the Janus Club. I realized I don't have much experience finding her when she doesn't want to be found.

I went over her workstation in the cave ...found how she sent the bogus crime alert to my monitor... found an e-mail to Barbara... If Barbara knew where she was, she would've told me... there was no point in opening the letter... the subject line read "estrogen solidarity"... impossible woman.

I looked over the bogus newspaper. After the details of the cat crime, there was a story about a school board and a municipal bond referendum. Every movie where they show a newspaper, next to whatever headline you're supposed to look at, there's this story about the school board and municipal bond referenda. Every time. I turned to the last page where the crossword was just a little larger than it should be. Underneath it, in three point type were the words Nigma Novelties.

Eddie.

Gotcha, Kitten.

Much as I wanted to beat the truth out of him, I couldn't actually confront Riddler. Selina could have told him anything. If she said "fight with Bruce" and I went in there as Batman, I was busted. But if she had said she wanted the paper to taunt Batman and I asked about her as Bruce...

So I was slightly screwed.

I waited until the little weasel left, then conducted a thorough search. I found an address book, which was so easy it would have been a trap coming from any other source. With Riddler, it was exactly what it appeared: an address book. If it were a trap, it would be Phonetian hieroglyphs written backwards in lemon juice.

The book listed three cat-lairs.

One was an old address: a fur warehouse before the quake, now a homeless shelter.

One she'd apparently rented to Mr. Freeze as storage space. Six coldsuits and a dry ice machine.

The third lair had a light on...I let myself in ... there was a distinctive smell in the air—a heater that had been cold a long time had just been turned on again... And there she was, stroking one of the cats, though I couldn't see which. I moved closer—it was Nutmeg. Selina didn't know I was there yet but the cat did. It's creepy the way those cats reflect her feelings. The amber eyes staring at me were most definitely hostile. I needed to announce my presence before the little furball tipped her, so I said:

"You do have an astonishing array of cat-stuff around this place, you know that?"

"If I wanted to talk to you, I would've waited on the roof," she answered without turning.

"You're not going to make this any easier are you?"

*Shit, out of practice. I set that one up. Here it comes, I thought, an "easy way or the hard way" comeback.*

"You're tracking mud on my carpet."

*That wasn't encouraging.*

"C'mon, Kitten, work with me here. 'the easy way or the hard way...'"

She turned to look at me.

"Look one of us has to be the black hole of brooding despair and if you're not going to do it..."

*Aha. Banter. It was a start.* Except there wasn't a hint of anything in the words. No anger, no sarcasm, no spite; so much for foreplay. It was time to do what I came for:

"I'm sorry," I said sincerely.

"Not good enough."

"I know."

"Good."

"I can't unsay what's been said."

"What was said was that..."

*Oh God, don't repeat that please, my brain railed at her, please don't say it, don't say it out loud, don't say it...*

"...I'm not that big a factor in your life and that—"

"PLEASE don't repeat that."

"WHY NOT!" I heard her scream only after my own "I KNOW WHAT I SAID!"

"I know what I said," I repeated softly.

Even yelling wouldn't work now. Nothing would. I couldn't change anything that happened. We had our whole lives before us, we had all those possibilities... and I poisoned all of it forever.

"Would it help if I said I didn't mean it?"

*Desperate. Foolish. If I didn't mean that what else didn't I mean. Here it comes...*

"It might," Selina said gently.

"What?"

"It might help a little."

"I don't understand."

"Yeah, that much you've made very clear. You asked, I believe—do tell me if I've mistaken something—you asked if saying you didn't mean it would help."

"Right, I was here, I know what I said."

"That's really not a phrase you want to be repeating right now."

I felt my cheeks burn at the slap. She went on.

"I said it might. That's 'would it help'/'yes it might.' And you're at a loss on what to say next?"

"I just don't understand."

"I can't believe this is the crack intellect that's the terror of the underworld. Have you always been this dense? 'Kitten, Would it help if I said it I didn't mean it'-'Yes Bruce, actually it might'- and now *you* say..."

"But I can't unsay it."

"No, the past is funny that way. You can't unsay what's been said or undo what's been done. You deal with it and move on."

*Something very important just happened.*

"Say that again."

"Oh I give up. First you said—"

"JUST REPEAT THAT LAST PART," I shouted.

"Deal with it and move on?"

That was it: Move forward.

This one thing in the past didn't get to dominate all that came after it. It didn't have that kind of power. Deal with it and move on. Can't change what's happened—move forward.

The Sensei said those moments of understanding never last.

But at that one moment...

I understood.

Stop, assess what happened, then move on.

I'm not sure how long I stood there. I'm not sure if she said anything. I'm not sure if I said anything. It might have been only a second.

"I have to go somewhere. Hold that thought," I stammered, then realized that was wrong. "No, better idea, you come too."

She thought I was crazy. She might have been right.

It was a short walk, and she said nothing. I said nothing.

We reached the alley, and realization dawned.

"This is where it happened, isn't it?" she whispered. "Your parents?"

I pointed.

"That spot right there. 24 years, 2 days..."

"Oh holy sh—"

"...and 4 hours ago."

"Well that explains a lot." She looked at me shrewdly. "Doesn't excuse it, mind you, but it explains it."

In my mind's ear I heard my mother's voice:

"Exactly what I was going to say. Smart girl, Bruce..."

"I get it, Mom" I whispered.

"...but the wardrobe needs some work. Is that purple leather?"

### January 29<sup>th</sup>, A + 8

"Miss Gordon," Alfred was saying, "I do beg you to reconsider. Gotham City is a fashion capital. There are over six thousand dress-makers and couturiers. If Miss Crenshaw, whom I recommended, failed to please, there are certainly other alternatives without resorting to..."

"Mr. Corry recommends Flavel, Wenelio's, or, what was the third one?"

"The House of Shri," the odious Mr. Corry lisped.

Alfred sighed. Barbara's tastes were sufficiently conservative to accept his direction on tableware, invitations, and menus. But not in matters of dress. The stolid Englishwoman he brought in had produced such stodgy sketches of high-bodiced lace, the psyche who designed the Batgirl costume rebelled. She called Mr. Corry, and the dreaded wedding planner now had his foot in the door once again. It wouldn't stop with the dress, Alfred was sure. There would be more abominations to endure.

"Wenelio will provide a crash to contrast your dress," he was saying, "Silver lame is very becoming against the white."

Alfred coughed. "I really don't think..." he began.

"I like it," Barbara chirped.

There they sat, the bat family. Like nothing happened.

Well, no. It had been a little strained with Bruce, but we were working through it. Barb's a doll. Dickey the Dick, on the other hand, didn't get around to telling me about Hell-Month until A + 5. What a guy.

In sync, the four of them turned and looked at me: Deadlock. A silver lame crash.

"What does Dick say?" I asked.

"For it."

"I vote against." *Take that you little shit. Meow.*

Bruce came over beaming, and I guessed he was the second vote against the crash.

"You ever going to let Dick off the hook?" he asked.

"Eventually," I smiled.

"I've been meaning to ask: recent events improve your opinion of Ra's at all?"

That's silver lame crash to forgiving Dick to Ra's the hairdo! I will never understand the way that man's mind works, not after a hundred Hell Months. My confusion must have showed because Bruce very thoughtfully reminded me of my early assessment:

"He's a flyweight, he's a hairdo..."

"He is," I answered, "he really is."

"You don't think he's a dangerous threat?"

"Cause he shows up every fifty months looking jaded, bleak, and gaunt? No. I'm not threatened by gaunt. Gaunt is not a global threat. They're gaunt over at Tower Records. It's not intimidating."

"You are the most impossible woman."

"And he has a cape, oh well, then he must be a force to be reckoned with... Oh, sorry. Incidentally, somebody should tell those people at Tower Records that they're not rock stars themselves."